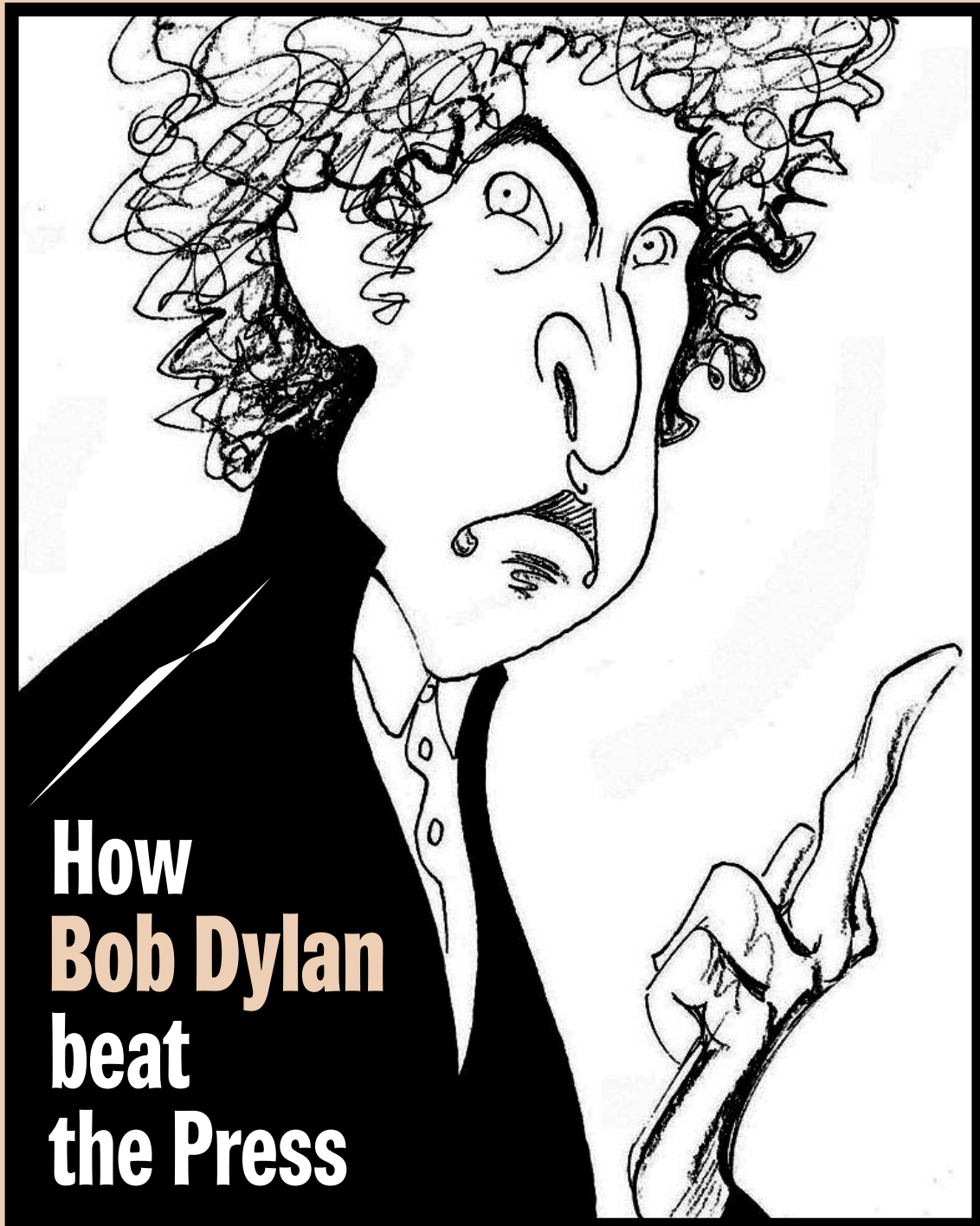


TheReader

ColdType

Writing Worth Reading  Issue 3, December 2005



**How
Bob Dylan
beat
the Press**

 **WHY I WANTED TO SLAP GEORGE W. BUSH** – Page 11



ColdType TheReader

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Editor: Tony Sutton / editor@coldtype.net

Cover illustration: David Anderson / www.d-andersonillustration.com

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“People had a warped idea of me, usually those outside the music industry – ‘spokesman of a generation,’ and all that.”



GREG MITCHELL

How Bob Dylan beat the press

Surely, one of the non-musical highlights of the extraordinary Martin Scorsese film about Bob Dylan’s early days, airing on PBS recently, arrives when a press photographer, at a briefing, asks the young rock star to pose for a picture. “Suck on a corner of your glasses,” the gentleman instructs.

Dylan, fingering his Ray-Bans, rebels. “You want me to suck on my glasses?” he asks incredulously.

“Just suck your glasses,” the photog advises.

“Do you want to suck my glasses?” Dylan asks, handing them to the photog, who obliges by licking them. “Anybody else?” Bob wonders.

This exchange, from 1966, is only one of several press games/battles that play a key role in part II of the documentary, *No Direction Home*. In fact, they represent the climax of the film, as Dylan burns out, not just from the boos that greeted his switch from acoustic to electric but from inane

questioning by the press. The film ends with Dylan begging for a long vacation, followed by end notes revealing that he had his famous motorcycle accident a few months later – and then did not tour for seven years.

That’s one way to Beat the Press.

But Dylan has always had a combative relationship with the media, and wrote one of the most scathing and, arguably, most influential attacks on the press in modern times, “Ballad of Thin Man.” That song holds that memorable refrain: “Something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?”

And he’s still at it. Earlier this year, on “60 Minutes,” Ed Bradley asked him about the passage in his recent memoir “Chronicles” where Dylan revealed that he always figured the press was something “you lied to.” Bob told Bradley that he knew he had to answer to God, but not to reporters.

Of course, there was a time when some people thought Dylan was God.

MEDIA AT WORK

In any case, the Scorsese film shows plenty of evidence of why Dylan turned off to the press long ago. Along with many of his fans, they just didn't "get" him, especially when he changed the face of popular music in the mid-1960s.

"You don't sing protest songs anymore," a reporter asks.

"All my songs are protest songs," Dylan replies evenly. "All I do is protest."

Later, someone at a press conference asks him how many other protest singers exist.

It's as if the man is asking Sen. Joe McCarthy for the number of Communists in the State Department. Dylan ponders it, then replies, "About 136." No one laughs.

"You say about 136 – or exactly 136?" the reporter asks.

"Either 136 or 142," Dylan says, settling it.

On another occasion, a reporter asks what "message" and "philosophy" he was trying to impart by wearing a Triumph motorcycle shirt on the cover of the greatest album of all time, "Highway 61 Revisited." Dylan says he just happened to be wearing it the day the photo was snapped, but the press guy persists. Finally Dylan pleads, "We all like motorcycles some, right?"

Then there's the young woman who credits him with a song he didn't write ("Eve of Destruction") and asks if his songs have a "subtle message." When Bob asks where she read that, she replies, "In a movie magazine."

On another occasion, a man asks, "For those of us well over 30, how do you label yourself and what's your role?"

Dylan laughs, then answers, "Well, I sort

of label myself as well under 30 – and my role is just to stay here as long as I can."

It only gets worse. One reporter asks if he agrees that his early records were better than his latest. Another wonders if he considers himself "the ultimate beatnik." Bob asks him what HE thinks about that. The man says he can't comment because he has never heard Dylan sing.

"You've never heard me sing and yet you want to sit there and ask me these questions?" Dylan replies.

Just before Dylan announces that he wants to quit for awhile, he is shown in a hotel room on the road discussing press coverage of his riotous 1966 tour of England with The Hawks, where audience members shouted out that he was a "traitor" or even "Judas" for abandoning folk music. Dylan comments that one story actually claimed that "everybody" walked out of one show.

"I saw one person walk out," he relates. Then he jokes that he will walk out of the next show. "I'll tell them Dylan got sick," he promises. Which was true enough. His semi-retirement soon followed.

In the Scorsese film, the current-day Dylan comments a bit about all of this. "I had no answers to any of those questions," he explains. "But it didn't stop the press from asking them. For some reason they thought performers had the answers to all these problems in society. It's absurd."

He also says: "People had a warped idea of me, usually those outside the music industry – 'spokesman of a generation,' and all that."

Spokesman or not, "Ballad of a Thin Man" still rings true, exactly 40 years after it first appeared:

MEDIA AT WORK

*You walk into the room
With a pencil in your hand
You see somebody naked
And you say, "Who is that man?"
You try so hard
But you don't understand
Just what you will say
When you get home*

*Because something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mister Jones?*

*Well, you walk into the room
Like a camel and then you frown
You put your eyes in your pocket*

*And your nose on the ground
There ought to be a law
Against you comin' around
You should be made
To wear earphones*

*Because something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mister Jones?*

Greg Mitchell (contact him at gmitchell@editorandpublisher.com) is editor of E&P, former executive editor of Crawdaddy, and attended one of Dylan's electric shows in 1965. This article was first published at editorandpublisher.com



HURRICANE KATRINA

“We were hiding from possible criminal elements, but equally and definitely, we were hiding from the police and sheriffs with their martial law, curfew and shoot-to-kill policies.”



LARRY BRADSHAW & LORRIE BETH SLONSKY

The real heroes of New Orleans

Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky are emergency medical services (EMS) workers from San Francisco. They were attending an EMS conference in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck. They spent most of the next week trapped by the flooding – and the martial law cordon around the city

Two days after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the Walgreens store at the corner of Royal and Iberville Streets in the city’s historic French Quarter remained locked. The dairy display case was clearly visible through the widows. It was now 48 hours without electricity, running water, plumbing, and the milk, yogurt, and cheeses were beginning to spoil in the 90-degree heat.

The owners and managers had locked up the food, water, pampers and prescriptions, and fled the city. Outside Walgreens’ windows, residents and tourists grew increasingly thirsty and hungry. The much-

promised federal, state and local aid never materialized, and the windows at Walgreens gave way to the looters.

There was an alternative. The cops could have broken one small window and distributed the nuts, fruit juices and bottled water in an organized and systematic manner. But they did not. Instead, they spent hours playing cat and mouse, temporarily chasing away the looters.

We have yet to see any of the TV coverage or look at a newspaper. We are willing to guess that there were no video images or front-page pictures of European or affluent white tourists looting the Walgreens in the French Quarter.

We also suspect the media will have been inundated with “hero” images of the National Guard, the troops and police struggling to help the “victims” of the hurricane. What you will not see, but what we witnessed, were the real heroes and sheroes of the hurricane relief effort: the working class of New Orleans.

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The maintenance workers who used a forklift to carry the sick and disabled. The engineers who rigged, nurtured and kept the generators running. The electricians who improvised thick extension cords stretching over blocks to share the little electricity we had in order to free cars stuck on rooftop parking lots. Nurses who took over for mechanical ventilators and spent many hours on end manually forcing air into the lungs of unconscious patients to keep them alive. Doormen who rescued folks stuck in elevators. Refinery workers who broke into boat yards, “stealing” boats to rescue their neighbors clinging to their roofs in flood waters. Mechanics who helped hotwire any car that could be found to ferry people out of the city. And the food service workers who scoured the commercial kitchens, improvising communal meals for hundreds of those stranded.

Most of these workers had lost their homes and had not heard from members of their families. Yet they stayed and provided the only infrastructure for the 20 percent of New Orleans that was not under water.

ON DAY TWO, there were approximately 500 of us left in the hotels in the French Quarter. We were a mix of foreign tourists, conference attendees like ourselves and locals who had checked into hotels for safety and shelter from Katrina.

Some of us had cell phone contact with family and friends outside of New Orleans. We were repeatedly told that all sorts of resources, including the National Guard and scores of buses, were pouring into the city. The buses and the other resources must have been invisible, because none of

us had seen them.

We decided we had to save ourselves. So we pooled our money and came up with \$25,000 to have ten buses come and take us out of the city. Those who didn’t have the requisite \$45 each were subsidized by those who did have extra money.

We waited for 48 hours for the buses, spending the last 12 hours standing outside, sharing the limited water, food and clothes we had. We created a priority boarding area for the sick, elderly and newborn babies. We waited late into the night for the “imminent” arrival of the buses. The buses never arrived. We later learned that the minute they arrived at the city limits, they were commandeered by the military.

By Day Four, our hotels had run out of fuel and water. Sanitation was dangerously bad. As the desperation and despair increased, street crime as well as water levels began to rise. The hotels turned us out and locked their doors, telling us that “officials” had told us to report to the convention center to wait for more buses. As we entered the center of the city, we finally encountered the National Guard.

The guard members told us we wouldn’t be allowed into the Superdome, as the city’s primary shelter had descended into a humanitarian and health hellhole. They further told us that the city’s only other shelter – the convention center – was also descending into chaos and squalor, and that the police weren’t allowing anyone else in. We asked, “If we can’t go to the only two shelters in the city, what was our alternative?” The guards told us that this was our problem – and no, they didn’t have extra water to give to us. This would be the

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start of our numerous encounters with callous and hostile “law enforcement.”

WE WALKED to the police command center at Harrah’s on Canal Street and were told the same thing – that we were on our own, and no, they didn’t have water to give us. We now numbered several hundred.

We held a mass meeting to decide a course of action. We agreed to camp outside the police command post. We would be plainly visible to the media and constitute a highly visible embarrassment to city officials. The police told us that we couldn’t stay. Regardless, we began to settle in and set up camp.

The police commander came across the street to address our group. He told us he had a solution: we should walk to the Pontchartrain Expressway and cross the greater New Orleans Bridge to the south side of the Mississippi, where the police had buses lined up to take us out of the city. We explained to the commander that there had been lots of misinformation, so was he sure that there were buses waiting for us. He turned to the crowd and stated emphatically, “I swear to you that the buses are there.”

We organized ourselves, and the 200 of us set off for the bridge with great excitement and hope. As we marched past the convention center, many locals saw our determined and optimistic group, and asked where we were headed. We told them about the great news.

Families immediately grabbed their few belongings, and quickly, our numbers doubled and then doubled again. Babies in strollers now joined us, as did people using

crutches, elderly clasping walkers and other people in wheelchairs. We marched the two to three miles to the freeway and up the steep incline to the bridge. It now began to pour down rain, but it didn’t dampen our enthusiasm.

As we approached the bridge, armed sheriffs formed a line across the foot of the bridge. Before we were close enough to speak, they began firing their weapons over our heads, sending the crowd fleeing. A few of us inched forward and managed to engage some of the sheriffs in conversation. We told them of our conversation with the police commander and the commander’s assurances. The sheriffs informed us that there were no buses waiting. The commander had lied to get us to move.

We asked why we couldn’t cross the bridge anyway, especially as there was little traffic on the six-lane highway. They responded that the West Bank was not going to become New Orleans, and there would be no Superdomes in their city. These were code words for: if you are poor and Black, you are not crossing the Mississippi River, and you are not getting out of New Orleans.

OUR SMALL GROUP retreated back down Highway 90 to seek shelter from the rain under an overpass. We debated our options and, in the end, decided to build an encampment in the middle of the Ponchartrain Expressway – on the center divide, between the O’Keefe and Tchoupitoulas exits. We reasoned that we would be visible to everyone, we would have some security being on an elevated freeway, and we could wait and watch for the arrival of the

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yet-to-be-seen buses.

All day long, we saw other families, individuals and groups make the same trip up the incline in an attempt to cross the bridge, only to be turned away – some chased away with gunfire, others simply told no, others verbally berated and humiliated. Thousands of New Orleaners were prevented and prohibited from self-evacuating the city on foot.

Meanwhile, the only two city shelters sank further into squalor and disrepair. The only way across the bridge was by vehicle. We saw workers stealing trucks, buses, moving vans, semi-trucks and any car that could be hotwired. All were packed with people trying to escape the misery that New Orleans had become. Our encampment began to blossom. Someone stole a water delivery truck and brought it up to us. Let's hear it for looting! A mile down the freeway, an Army truck lost two pallets of C-rations on a tight turn. We ferried the food to our camp in shopping carts.

Now – secure with these two necessities, food and water – cooperation, community and creativity flowered. We organized a clean-up and hung garbage bags from the rebar poles. We made beds from wood pallets and cardboard. We designated a storm drain as the bathroom, and the kids built an elaborate enclosure for privacy out of plastic, broken umbrellas and other scraps. We even organized a food-recycling system where individuals could swap out parts of C-rations (applesauce for babies and candies for kids!).

This was something we saw repeatedly in the aftermath of Katrina. When individuals had to fight to find food or water, it

meant looking out for yourself. You had to do whatever it took to find water for your kids or food for your parents. But when these basic needs were met, people began to look out for each other, working together and constructing a community.

If the relief organizations had saturated the city with food and water in the first two or three days, the desperation, frustration and ugliness would not have set in. Flush with the necessities, we offered food and water to passing families and individuals. Many decided to stay and join us. Our encampment grew to 80 or 90 people.

From a woman with a battery-powered radio, we learned that the media was talking about us. Up in full view on the freeway, every relief and news organizations saw us on their way into the city. Officials were being asked what they were going to do about all those families living up on the freeway. The officials responded that they were going to take care of us. Some of us got a sinking feeling. "Taking care of us" had an ominous tone to it.

Our sinking feeling (along with the sinking city) was accurate. Just as dusk set in, a sheriff showed up, jumped out of his patrol vehicle, aimed his gun at our faces and screamed, "Get off the fucking freeway." A helicopter arrived and used the wind from its blades to blow away our flimsy structures. As we retreated, the sheriff loaded up his truck with our food and water.

Once again, at gunpoint, we were forced off the freeway. All the law enforcement agencies appeared threatened when we congregated into groups of 20 or more. In every congregation of "victims," they saw "mob" or "riot." We felt safety in numbers.

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Our “we must stay together” attitude was impossible because the agencies would force us into small atomized groups.

In the pandemonium of having our camp raided and destroyed, we scattered once again. Reduced to a small group of eight people, in the dark, we sought refuge in an abandoned school bus, under the freeway on Cilo Street. We were hiding from possible criminal elements, but equally and definitely, we were hiding from the police and sheriffs with their martial law, curfew and shoot-to-kill policies.

The next day, our group of eight walked most of the day, made contact with the New Orleans Fire Department and were eventually airlifted out by an urban search-and-rescue team. We were dropped off near the airport and managed to catch a ride with the National Guard. The two young guardsmen apologized for the limited response of the Louisiana guards. They explained that a large section of their unit was in Iraq and that meant they were shorthanded and were unable to complete all the tasks they were assigned.

WE ARRIVED at the airport on the day a massive airlift had begun. The airport had become another Superdome. We eight were caught in a press of humanity as flights were delayed for several hours while George Bush landed briefly at the airport for a photo op. After being evacuated on a Coast Guard cargo plane, we arrived in San Antonio, Texas.

There, the humiliation and dehumanization of the official relief effort continued. We were placed on buses and driven to a large field where we were forced to sit for hours and hours. Some of the buses didn't have air conditioners. In the dark, hundreds of us were forced to share two filthy overflowing porta-potties. Those who managed to make it out with any possessions (often a few belongings in tattered plastic bags) were subjected to two different dog-sniffing searches.

Most of us had not eaten all day because our C-rations had been confiscated at the airport – because the rations set off the metal detectors. Yet no food had been provided to the men, women, children, elderly and disabled, as we sat for hours waiting to be “medically screened” to make sure we weren't carrying any communicable diseases.

This official treatment was in sharp contrast to the warm, heartfelt reception given to us by ordinary Texans. We saw one airline worker give her shoes to someone who was barefoot. Strangers on the street offered us money and toiletries with words of welcome.

Throughout, the official relief effort was callous, inept and racist. There was more suffering than need be. Lives were lost that did not need to be lost.

*This article first appeared in the U.S. weekly Socialist Worker
(<http://www.socialistworker.org>)*



“The president did not see the look of horror on the faces of his staff as he began to defend his stance . . . Hands were signalling furiously now for me to end the interview.”



CAROLE COLEMAN

Why I wanted to slap George W. Bush

George W Bush was so upset by Carole Coleman’s White House interview that an official complaint was lodged with the Irish embassy. In this excerpt from her new book, Alleluia America! The RTE journalist explains why the president made her blood boil.

With just minutes to go to my interview with George W Bush, I was escorted to the White House library, where a staff member gave instructions on how to greet the president: “He’ll be coming in the door behind you, just stand up, turn around and extend your hand.”

I placed my notes on the coffee table, someone attached a microphone to my lapel, and I waited. The two chairs by the fireplace where the president and I would sit were at least six feet apart; clearly I would not be getting too close to him.

The room was well-lit, providing the kind of warm background conducive to a

fireside chat. Several people had crowded in behind me. I counted five members of the White House film crew, there was a stenographer sitting in the corner and three or four security staff. I was still counting them when someone spoke. “He’s coming.”

I stood up, turned around to face the door and seconds later the president strode towards me. Bush appeared shorter than on camera and he looked stern and rather grey that day.

“Thanks for comin’, Mr President” I said, sticking out my hand. I had borrowed this greeting directly from him. When Bush made a speech at a rally or town hall, he always began by saying “Thanks for comin’” in his man-of-the-people manner. If he detected the humour in my greeting, he didn’t let on. He took my hand with a firm grip and, bringing his face right up close to mine, stared me straight in the eyes for several seconds, as though drinking in every detail of my face. He sat down and an aide attached a microphone to his jacket.

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Nobody said a word. “We don’t address the president unless he speaks first,” a member of the film crew had told me earlier. The resulting silence seemed odd and disconcerting, so I broke it. “How has your day been, Mr President?” Without looking up at me, he continued to straighten his tie and replied in a strong Texan drawl, “Very busy.”

This was followed by an even more disconcerting silence that, compounded by the six feet separating us, made it difficult to establish any rapport.

“Will Mrs Bush be seeing any of our beautiful country?” I tried again, attempting to warm things up by adding that I had heard that the taoiseach would be keeping him too busy for sightseeing on his forthcoming trip to Ireland.

“He’s putting me to work, is he? Have you not interviewed Laura?” “No, I haven’t met your wife.” I suggested that he put in a good word for me. He chuckled. By now he seemed settled and the crew looked ready, but still nobody spoke. I was beginning to worry that the clock may have already started on my 10 minutes.

“Are we all ready to go then?” I asked, looking around the room. The next voice I heard was the president’s. “I think we have a spunky one here,” he said, to nobody in particular.

MC, a White House press officer whom I’ve decided not to identify, had phoned me three days earlier to say that President Bush would do an interview with RTE. “Good news,” she had said. “It goes this Thursday at 4.20pm. You will have 10 minutes with the president and Turkish television will talk to him just before you.”

My initial excitement was dampened only by the timing, much later than I had hoped. The interview would take place just three hours before I was to fly back to Ireland to cover his arrival at the EU summit at Dromoland Castle in Clare and just 15 minutes before the start of RTE’s Prime Time programme on which the interview would be broadcast. It would be practically impossible to have the president on air in time for this.

“That’s fabulous,” I gushed, “but is there any way I could go before the Turks?” I had previously explained about the Prime Time programme, so MC knew the situation. “I’ll look into it,” she offered.

The interview sounded like quite a production. We wouldn’t be able to just saunter in there with a camera. It would be filmed by a White House crew, which would then hand over the tapes to me to be copied and returned the same day.

MC asked me for a list of questions and topics, which she said was required for policy purposes in case I should want to ask something that the president needed to be briefed on. The request did not seem odd to me then. The drill had been exactly the same for an interview I had conducted six months earlier with the then secretary of state, Colin Powell.

“What would you ask the president of the United States?” I enquired of everyone I met in the following days. Ideas had already been scribbled on scattered notepads in my bedroom, on scraps of paper in my handbag and on my desk, but once the date was confirmed, I mined suggestions from my peers in RTE and from foreign policy analysts. I grilled my friends in Wash-

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ington and even pestered cab drivers. After turning everything over in my head, I settled on a list of 10 questions.

Securing a time swap with Turkish television ensured that I saw the president 10 minutes earlier, but there was still less than half an hour to bring the taped interview to the production place four blocks away in time for Prime Time.

Still, with the arrangements starting to fall into place, the sense of chaos receded and I returned to the questions, which by now were perpetually dancing around my head, even in my sleep. Reporters often begin a big interview by asking a soft question – to let the subject warm up before getting into the substance of the topic at hand. This was how I had initially intended to begin with Bush, but as I mentally rehearsed the likely scenario, I felt that too much time could be consumed by his first probable answer, praising Ireland and looking forward to his visit. We could, I had calculated, be into the third minute before even getting to the controversial topics. I decided to ditch the cordial introduction.

The majority of the Irish public, as far as I could tell, was angry with Bush and did not want to hear a cosy fireside chat in the middle of the most disputed war since Vietnam.

ON THURSDAY JUNE 24, Washington DC was bathed in a moist 90-degree heat, the type that makes you perspire all over after you have walked only two blocks. Stephanie and I arrived at the northwest gate of the White House that afternoon, and were directed to the Old Executive Office building, Vice President Dick

Cheney's headquarters, and were introduced to MC, whom I had spoken to only by phone. An elegant and confident woman, she was the cut of CJ, the feisty White House press secretary on *The West Wing* television drama.

A younger male sidekick named Colby stood close by nodding at everything she said and interjecting with a few comments of his own every now and then. Colby suggested that I ask the president about the yellow suit the taoiseach had worn the previous week at the G8 Summit on Sea Island in Georgia. I laughed loudly and then stopped to study his face for signs that he was joking – but he didn't appear to be. "The president has a good comment on that," he said.

The taoiseach's suit had been a shade of cream, according to the Irish embassy. But alongside the other more conservatively dressed leaders, it had appeared as a bright yellow, leaving our Bertie looking more like the lead singer in a band than the official representative of the European Union. It was amusing at the time, but I was not about to raise a yellow suit with the president. "Really?" I asked politely. But a little red flag went up inside my head.

Then MC announced that she had some news for me. "There may be another interview in the pipeline for you," she said.

"Me?"

"We're not supposed to tell you this yet, but we are trying to set up an interview with the first lady."

She indicated that the White House had already been in contact with RTE to make arrangements for the interview at Dromoland Castle, where the president and

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Mrs Bush would be staying. As an admirer of Laura Bush's cool grace and sharp intellect, I had requested interviews with her several times previously without any reply. Now the first lady of the United States was being handed to me on a plate. I could not believe my luck.

"Of course, it's not certain yet," MC added. And then her sidekick dropped his second bombshell. "We'll see how you get on with the president first."

I'm sure I continued smiling, but I was stunned. What I understood from this was that if I pleased the White House with my questioning of the president, I would get to interview the first lady. Were they trying to ensure a soft ride for the president, or was I the new flavour of the month with the first family?

"I'm going to give the president his final briefing. Are there any further questions you want to pass on to him?" MC asked.

"No," I said, "just tell him I want to chat."

Stephanie and I locked eyes and headed for the ladies' powder room, where we prayed.

"MR PRESIDENT," I began. "You will arrive in Ireland in less than 24 hours' time. While our political leaders will welcome you, unfortunately the majority of our people will not. They are annoyed about the war in Iraq and about Abu Ghraib. Are you bothered by what Irish people think?"

The president was reclining in his seat and had a half-smile on his face, a smile I had often seen when he had to deal with something he would rather not.

"Listen. I hope the Irish people under-

stand the great values of our country. And if they think that a few soldiers represent the entirety of America, they don't really understand America then . . . We are a compassionate country. We're a strong country, and we'll defend ourselves. But we help people. And we've helped the Irish and we'll continue to do so. We've got a good relationship with Ireland."

"And they are angry over Iraq as well and particularly the continuing death toll there," I added, moving him on to the war that had claimed 100 Iraqi lives that very day. He continued to smile, but just barely.

"Well, I can understand that. People don't like war. But what they should be angry about is the fact that there was a brutal dictator there that had destroyed lives and put them in mass graves and torture rooms . . . Look, Saddam Hussein had used weapons of mass destruction against his own people, against the neighbourhood. He was a brutal dictator who posed a threat that the United Nations voted unanimously to say, Mr Saddam Hussein . . ."

Having noted the tone of my questions, the president had now sat forward in his chair and had become animated, gesturing with his hands for emphasis. But as I listened to the history of Saddam Hussein and the weapons inspectors and the UN resolutions, my heart was sinking. He was resorting to the type of meandering stock answer I had heard scores of times and had hoped to avoid. Going back over this old ground could take two or three minutes and allow him to keep talking without dealing with the current state of the war. It was a filibuster of sorts. If I didn't challenge him, the interview would be a wasted

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opportunity.

“But, Mr President, you didn’t find any weapons,” I interjected.

“Let me finish, let me finish. May I finish?”

With his hand raised, he requested that I stop speaking. He paused and looked me straight in the eye to make sure I had got the message. He wanted to continue, so I backed off and he went on. “The United Nations said, ‘Disarm or face serious consequences’. That’s what the United Nations said. And guess what? He didn’t disarm. He didn’t disclose his arms. And therefore he faced serious consequences. But we have found a capacity for him to make a weapon. See, he had the capacity to make weapons . . .”

I was now beginning to feel shut out of this event. He had the floor and he wasn’t letting me dance. My blood was boiling to such a point that I felt like slapping him. But I was dealing with the president of the United States; and he was too far away anyway. I suppose I had been naive to think that he was making himself available to me so I could spar with him or plumb the depths of his thought processes. Sitting there, I knew that I was nobody special and that this was just another opportunity for the president to repeat his mantra. He seemed irked to be faced with someone who wasn’t nodding gravely at him as he was speaking.

“But Mr President,” I interrupted again, “the world is a more dangerous place today. I don’t know whether you can see that or not.”

“Why do you say that?”

“There are terrorist bombings every sin-

gle day. It’s now a daily event. It wasn’t like that two years ago.”

“What was it like on September 11 2001? It was a . . . there was relative calm, we . . .”

“But it’s your response to Iraq that’s considered . . .”

“Let me finish. Let me finish. Please. You ask the questions and I’ll answer them, if you don’t mind.”

His hand was raised again as if to indicate that he was not going to tolerate this. Again, I felt I had no choice but to keep quiet.

“On September 11 2001, we were attacked in an unprovoked fashion. Everybody thought the world was calm. There have been bombings since then – not because of my response to Iraq. There were bombings in Madrid, there were bombings in Istanbul. There were bombings in Bali. There were killings in Pakistan.”

He seemed to be finished, so I took a deep breath and tried once again. So far, facial expressions were defining this interview as much as anything that was said, so I focused on looking as if I was genuinely trying to fathom him.

“Indeed, Mr President, and I think Irish people understand that. But I think there is a feeling that the world has become a more dangerous place because you have taken the focus off Al-Qaeda and diverted into Iraq. Do you not see that the world is a more dangerous place? I saw four of your soldiers lying dead on the television the other day, a picture of four soldiers just lying there without their flak jackets.”

“Listen, nobody cares more about death than I do . . .”

“Is there a point or place . . .”

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“Let me finish. Please. Let me finish, and then you can follow up, if you don’t mind.”

By now he was getting used to the rhythm of this interview and didn’t seem quite so taken aback by my attempt to take control of it. “Nobody cares more about death than I do. I care a lot about it. But I do believe the world is a safer place and becoming a safer place. I know that a free Iraq is going to be a necessary part of changing the world.”

The president seemed to be talking more openly now and from the heart rather than from a script. The history lesson on Saddam was over. “Listen, people join terrorist organisations because there’s no hope and there’s no chance to raise their families in a peaceful world where there is not freedom. And so the idea is to promote freedom and at the same time protect our security. And I do believe the world is becoming a better place, absolutely.”

I could not tell how much time had elapsed, maybe five or six minutes, so I moved quickly on to the question I most wanted to ask George Bush in person.

“Mr President, you are a man who has a great faith in God. I’ve heard you say many times that you strive to serve somebody greater than yourself.”

“Right.”

“Do you believe that the hand of God is guiding you in this war on terror?”

This question had been on my mind ever since September 11, when Bush began to invoke God in his speeches. He spoke as if he believed that his job of stewarding America through the attacks and beyond was somehow preordained, that he had been chosen for this role. He closed his eyes

as he began to answer.

“Listen, I think that God . . . that my relationship with God is a very personal relationship. And I turn to the Good Lord for strength. I turn to the Good Lord for guidance. I turn to the Good Lord for forgiveness. But the God I know is not one that . . . the God I know is one that promotes peace and freedom. But I get great sustenance from my personal relationship.”

He sat forward again. “That doesn’t make me think I’m a better person than you are, by the way. Because one of the great admonitions in the Good Book is, ‘Don’t try to take a speck out of your eye if I’ve got a log in my own’.”

I suspected that he was also telling me that I should not judge him.

I switched to Ireland again and to the controversy then raging over the Irish government’s decision to allow the use of Shannon Airport for the transport of soldiers and weapons to the Gulf.

“You are going to meet Bertie Ahern when you arrive at Shannon Airport tomorrow. I guess he went out on a limb for you, presumably because of the great friendship between our two countries. Can you look him in the eye when you get there and say, ‘It will be worth it, it will work out?’”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t be doing this, I wouldn’t have made the decision I did if I didn’t think the world would be better.”

I felt that the President had now become personally involved in this interview, even quoting a Bible passage, so I made one more stab at trying to get inside his head.

“Why is it that others don’t understand what you are about?”

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He shrugged. "I don't know. History will judge what I'm about."

I could not remember my next question. My mind had gone completely blank. The president had not removed me from his gaze since we had begun and I wanted to keep up the eye contact. If I diverted to my notes on the table beside me, he would know he had flustered me. For what seemed like an eternity, but probably no more than two seconds, I stared at him, searching his eyes for inspiration. It finally came.

"Can I just turn to the Middle East?"

"Sure."

He talked about his personal commitment to solving that conflict. As he did so, I could see one of the White House crew signalling for me to wrap up the interview, but the president was in full flight.

"Like Iraq, the Palestinian and the Israeli issue is going to require good security measures," he said.

Now out of time, I was fully aware that another question was pushing it, but I would never be here again and I had spent four years covering an administration that appeared to favour Israel at every turn.

"And perhaps a bit more even-handedness from America?" I asked, though it came out more as a comment.

The president did not see the look of horror on the faces of his staff as he began to defend his stance. "I'm the first president to have called for a Palestinian state. That to me sounds like a reasonable and balanced approach. I will not allow terrorists determine the fate, as best I can, of people who want to be free."

Hands were signalling furiously now for me to end the interview.

"Mr President, thank you very much."

"You're welcome," he replied, still half-smiling and half-frowning.

It was over. I felt like a delinquent child who had been reprimanded by a stern, unwavering father. My face must have been the same colour as my suit. Yet I also knew that we had discussed some important issues – probably more candidly than I had heard from President Bush in some time.

I was removing my microphone when he addressed me.

"Is that how you do it in Ireland – interrupting people all the time?"

I froze. He was not happy with me and was letting me know it.

"Yes," I stuttered, determined to maintain my own half-smile.

I was aching to get out of there for a breath of air when I remembered that I had earlier discussed with staff the possibility of having my picture taken with the president. I had been told that, when the interview was over, I could stand up with him and the White House photographer would snap a picture. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, I stood up and asked him to join me.

"Oh, she wants the photograph now," he said from his still-seated position. He rose, stood beside me and put an arm around my shoulder. Taking his cue, I put an arm up around his shoulder and we both grinned for the cameras.

In my haste to leave I almost forgot the tapes and had to be reminded by the film crew to take them. I and my assistants bolted out to the street. We ran, high heels and all, across Lafayette Park. Running through rush-hour traffic, I thought that

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this had to be about as crazy as a journalist's job gets.

I had just been admonished by the president of the United States and now I was turning cartwheels in order to get the interview on air. As I dashed past a waste bin, I had a fleeting urge to throw in the tapes and run home instead.

AT THE STUDIO I handed over the tapes. My phone rang. It was MC, and her voice was cold. "We just want to say how disappointed we are in the way you conducted the interview," she said.

"How is that?" I asked.

"You talked over the president, not letting him finish his answers."

"Oh, I was just moving him on," I said, explaining that I wanted some new insight from him, not two-year-old answers.

"He did give you plenty of new stuff."

She estimated that I had interrupted the president eight times and added that I had upset him. I was upset too, I told her. The line started to break up; I was in a basement with a bad phone signal. I took her number and agreed to call her back. I dialled the White House number and she was on the line again.

"I'm here with Colby," she indicated.

"Right."

"You were given an opportunity to interview the leader of the free world and you blew it," she began.

I was beginning to feel as if I might be dreaming. I had naively believed the American president was referred to as the "leader of the free world" only in an unofficial tongue-in-cheek sort of way by outsiders, and not among his closest staff.

"You were more vicious than any of the White House press corps or even some of them up on Capitol Hill . . . The president leads the interview," she said.

"I don't agree," I replied, my initial worry now turning to frustration. "It's the journalist's job to lead the interview."

It was suggested that perhaps I could edit the tapes to take out the interruptions, but I made it clear that this would not be possible. As the conversation progressed, I learnt that I might find it difficult to secure further co-operation from the White House. A man's voice then came on the line. Colby, I assumed. "And, it goes without saying, you can forget about the interview with Laura Bush."

Clearly the White House had thought they would be dealing with an Irish "colleen" bowled over by the opportunity to interview the Bushes. If anyone there had done their research on RTE's interviewing techniques, they might have known better. MC also indicated that she would be contacting the Irish Embassy in Washington – in other words, an official complaint from Washington to Dublin.

"I don't know how we are going to repair this relationship, but have a safe trip back to Ireland," MC concluded. I told her I had not meant to upset her since she had been more than helpful to me. The conversation ended. By the time I got to the control room, the Prime Time broadcast had just started. It was at the point of the first confrontation with the "leader of the free world" and those gathered around the monitors were glued to it. "Well done," someone said. "This is great."

I thought about the interview again as I

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climbed up the steps to RTE's live camera position at Dromoland Castle to account for myself on the 6pm news next day. By now the White House had vented its anger to the Irish embassy in Washington. To make matters worse for the administration, the interview had made its way onto American television and CNN was replaying it around the world and by the end of the day it had been aired in Baghdad.

Had I been fair? Should I just have been more deferential to George Bush? I felt that I had simply done my job and shuddered at the thought of the backlash I would surely have faced in Ireland had I not challenged the president on matters that had changed the way America was viewed around the world. Afterwards I bumped straight into the taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who was waiting to go on air.

"Howya," he said, winking.

"I hope this hasn't caused you too much hassle, taoiseach," I blurted.

"Arrah, don't worry at all; you haven't caused me one bit of hassle," he smiled wryly. I don't know what he said to the president, who reportedly referred to the interview immediately upon arrival, but if the taoiseach was annoyed with me or with RTE, he didn't show it.

When I returned to my little world on the street called M in Washington, I felt a tad more conspicuous than when I'd left for Ireland. Google was returning more than 100,000 results on the subject of the 12-minute interview. The vast majority of bloggers felt it was time a reporter had

challenged Bush.

At the White House, the fact that I had been asked to submit questions prior to the interview generated enquiries from the American press corps. "Any time a reporter sits down with the president they are welcome to ask him whatever questions they want to ask," Scott McClellan, the White House press secretary, told the CBS correspondent Bill Plante.

"Yes, but that's beside the point," replied Plante. Under repeated questioning, McClellan conceded that other staff members might have asked for questions. "Certainly there will be staff-level discussion, talking about what issues reporters may want to bring up in some of these interviews. I mean that happens all the time."

I had not been prevented from asking any of my questions. The only topics I had been warned away from were the Bush daughters Jenna and Barbara, regular fodder for the tabloids, and Michael Moore – neither of which was on my list.

Moore did notice RTE's interview with the president and in the weeks that followed urged American journalists to follow the example of "that Irish woman".

"In the end, doesn't it always take the Irish to speak up?" he said. "She's my hero. Where are the Carole Colemans in the US press?"

This edited extract from Alleluia America! by Carole Coleman (published by The Liffey Press – see www.theliffeypress.com) was first published in The Sunday Times Ireland



WHAT WE EAT

“Hardee’s was catering to a young male audience, the tried-and-true constituency for fast food. With its tie-ins to Sports Illustrated, it was suggesting that eating its megaburger was some kind of X-treme sport.”



JOHN FEFER

The soul of new fast food

I’ve just ordered the Mixed Message salad at McDonald’s. That’s the Caesar salad of mostly iceberg lettuce, a couple grape tomatoes, a sprinkle of shredded parmesan, croutons, and a generous slab of fried chicken strips. The salad part is not bad for me, particularly since I opt for the low fat vinaigrette, courtesy of Paul Newman. The fried chicken strips, however, remind me that I’m in a fast food restaurant. It’s lunchtime, and I’m the only one in the place who seems to have ordered a salad. Should I feel good about my choice to forego a Big Mac and fries? Or should I feel guilty that I succumbed to the crispy chicken when I could have ordered the grilled version?

The crispy chicken Caesar is an apt metaphor for what’s been going on in the world of fast food. Quick-service restaurants – that’s the official name for McDonald’s, Burger King, and the like – have long flirted with healthier options like salads and lower fat sandwiches. But in the last

couple years, they’ve kicked their efforts up a notch. They’ve spent millions of dollars on splashy new product campaigns and have partnered with exercise gurus to get you off your butt and exercising. Still, it’s not like they’ve turned themselves into fat-free emporiums. Hamburgers, fried chicken, and greasy fries remain front and center in promotions and sales. And even the healthier options, with their gratuitous additions of fat or sugar, seem to have taken on the protective coloring of their environment.

Put Ronald McDonald on the couch and he’d confess to a serious identity crisis. “What am I, doc?” he’d ask his therapist. “Apple slices and aerobics or French fries and couch potatoes? Can you tell me what healthy fast food is, Doc? I’m worried that I’ve become just another oxymoron of popular culture, like educational television and eco-cruises.”

The struggle within the fast food world may well be the latest chapter in the “cul-

tural contradictions of capitalism” that sociologist Daniel Bell identified thirty years ago. Our Protestant ancestors whisper in one ear that we should scrimp and save and embrace austerity. Our modern corporate managers whisper in the other ear that if we don’t shop, our economy will drop. Ronald McDonald oscillates between the two extremes, not Ronald light and dark, but Ronald lite and heavy. How will he resolve his very American McDilemma?

LAST YEAR, America seemed to wake up from its fat-induced stupor. 2004 was the year of obesity lawsuits and reports that Big Food was poised to go the way of Big Tobacco. The movie *Super Size Me* engrossed and grossed out millions. The Center for Disease Control made headlines with its charge that America’s fat problem was costing us over \$100 billion a year. The *Big Loser* debuted on television and scored high enough in the ratings to prove that viewers prefer watching their fellow citizens lose weight to watching paint dry (hitherto considered a toss-up). Conservatives claimed that, like global warming and teenage pregnancy, America’s expanding waistline was all a matter of personal responsibility. Everyone else pointed fingers at the logical suspects: the purveyors of burgers, fries and sodas.

Without acknowledging responsibility – for that would cost big bucks in our litigious culture – the chain restaurants did make some changes. McDonald’s convinced celebrity dietician Bob Greene to walk and bike across the United States to promote its new adult happy meals. Burger King partnered with the President’s Challenge

Physical Activity Fitness Awards Program to encourage kids to exercise more. Ruby Tuesday put nutritional information all over its menu. With low fat, low sugar, and low carb diets each attracting their own sectarian followings, dieters and diabetics seemed to be the new, hot demographic.

But that was last year, and a year is a long time in the minds of marketers and media mavens, both of whom make a living by sifting through the tea leaves of popular culture to identify often spurious trends. Now, according to several high-profile reports, the chains have reverted to form. The turning point was Hardee’s Monster Thickburger, which came on line at the end of 2004. “People were blown away by the audaciousness of it,” says Jeff Mochal, public relations manager of Hardee’s. “That’s how we positioned it – a monument to decadence. It was a time when a lot of people were going low carb, low fat or low something. But here we came out with a big, bold audacious burger.”

Hardee’s was catering to a young male audience, the tried-and-true constituency for fast food. With its tie-ins to *Sports Illustrated*, Hardee’s was suggesting that eating its megaburger was some kind of X-treme sport. In *Jarhead*, Anthony Swofford’s memoir of the first Gulf War, the new recruits interpret even the most anti-war war movies as celebrations of combat. Similarly, a generation of young hungry guys sees *Super Size Me* as a how-to manual, its scare tactics on the level of *Reefer Madness*. For them, ordering Monster Thickburgers becomes the culinary equivalent of cliff jumping.

“We can put salad on the menu, but the

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problem is no one will buy it,” Jeff Mochal says. “It’s really a business decision. We’ve tested salads, and it’s not something that people will buy off our menu. Yes, we offer something for people on a different diet. But burgers are what we hang our hat on.”

It’s not just Hardee’s. RubyTuesday highlights their burgers too, including the Ultimate Colossal Burger, which outdoes Hardee’s heftiest by a third of a pound. Burger King, meanwhile, has just introduced its new Enormous Omelet Sandwich – “so big, breakfast will never be the same” – that clocks in at 730 calories and 43 grams of fat (out of a daily recommended ceiling of 66 grams). Despite plenty of criticism, 7-11 has not backed away from its X-Treme Gulp of 52 ounces of sugary pop.

So much for portion control. In our bulimic culture, binge follows purge with guilty regularity. The return to burgers is not so much a backlash as a tension that has long resided in American food ways. Fast food restaurants enjoyed explosive growth in the 1970s, but so did food coops. Diet books are perennial bestsellers, yet portions keep getting bigger. We want to halve our cake and eat it too.

DIETICIANS face a challenge. They can tell Americans what they should eat – that whole pyramid thing of more vegetables, more fruit, and more whole grains – and risk irrelevancy given what the majority of Americans eat every day. Or they can follow the maxim of social workers and start where the clients are. So, voila, frozen meals are not such a bad thing (nutrition consultant Carol Meerschaert recommends owning two microwaves). Eating breakfast

at fast food restaurants is also not such a bad thing, at least compared to not eating breakfast at all, and hey, the French cruller at Dunkin Donuts has only 150 calories. Bob Greene has devoted a whole book to eating right in all the wrong places, from Arby’s to Wendy’s.

Heart-healthy physician Dean Ornish, like Greene, has taken this approach one step further by burrowing into the belly of the McBeast. Ornish consults for McDonald’s, lending his expert cache to the megacorporation’s makeover. Demonstrating his ecumenical leanings, Ornish also consults for ConAgra and Pepsico, though he’s not so proud of any of these affiliations as to list them in his web bio. “It’s very easy to be a purist and demonize things, but as I get older I realize that life is shades of gray,” Ornish told *The New York Times* earlier this year. “Are these companies moving as quickly as I might like? Of course not. But they’re moving much faster than I ever thought possible.”

Surely Ornish didn’t think that McDonald’s would never change. A spokesperson for the company quoted an old Ray Krocism for me: “I don’t know what we’ll be selling in the year 2000 but we’ll be selling more of it than anyone else.” Of course, McDonald’s is not simply interesting in cornering the market on Caesar salads. The motivation of the chain restaurants to change seems to be threefold. They’re always introducing new products, some higher fat, some lower fat, in an effort to pique the palate, bring in new customers, and perhaps stumble on the killer dish. They also want to have something for everyone in a group, just in case the beef-

hater or the Atkins freak might steer the party to some other establishment.

And finally, as Michael Jacobson, executive director of Center for Science in the Public Interest, points out, the restaurants want to protect themselves from litigation. “It’s harder to sue a restaurant if it offered healthier options,” he says. “A person couldn’t complain that ‘it was the only restaurant within proximity and they didn’t have anything that couldn’t kill me.’”

Keeping one’s critics close at hand has generated some real changes. It’s both amazing and depressing that McDonald’s, as a result of recommendations from its Global Advisory Council on Balanced Lifestyles, offers raw apples as a dessert. The apples I tried with my Caesar salad were actually quite tasty. But why gild the lily with the caramel dipping sauce? And I ended up paying more than \$1 for my apple slices, quite a mark-up.

Other attempts to marry a fast food sensibility with healthy living verge on the ridiculous. “All of our menu items can be part of a balanced, active lifestyle,” the McDonald’s spokesperson told me. To my mind, the Big Mac could only be part of the balanced, active lifestyle of a tree sloth. It sounds all too much like Coke’s former CEO Doug Ivester touting the advantages of his product to Brazilians: “First of all, we have a very healthy product. Of course, our beverage contains sugar, but sugar is a good source of energy, of vitality.” Yes, and so is cocaine, but no one claims that that coke should be part of a healthy diet any longer.

Burger King’s partnership with the government’s fitness program, meanwhile, is

the kind of coupling that U.S. politicians should really be trying to prohibit. “It sounds like a joke,” Michael Jacobson says. “The President’s Council [on Physical Fitness and Sports] is itself a joke. It has no funding. It holds a press conference once or twice a year. It’s just window dressing, just a pretense that the U.S. government is doing something on nutrition.”

So, how do reputable nutritionists reconcile the tension between the ideal and the practical? Jacobson and CSPI are pushing for nutritional labeling on the menus of chain restaurants so that we know exactly what we’re eating. Jacobson also urges changes at the margins of the fast food menu. “You can make invisible changes – gradually cutting sodium in the food, using lower fat ground beef or mayonnaise, adding some whole grain to the bread or tortillas. These are marginal steps that people wouldn’t even notice, yet these steps would significantly improve the quality of foods.”

Marion Nestle is the author of *Food Politics* and a professor of nutrition at New York University. She wants chain restaurants to offer real choices, which means smaller portions at smaller prices. “Studies show that if foods taste good and are priced appropriately, people will eat them,” she says. “That goes for veggies in vending machines.”

IN HIS BOOK *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argued that proposals to improve television programming were spectacularly beside the point. “Television,” he argued, “serves us most usefully when presenting junk-entertainment; it serves us

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most ill when it co-opts serious modes of discourse – news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion—and turns them into entertainment packages. We would all be better off if television got worse, not better.”

If this argument applied to fast food, we should be campaigning for McDonald’s to stick to what it does best and stay far away from fruits and vegetables. Eating a salad on every tenth visit to McDonald’s salves our conscience and lulls us into thinking that we’re eating healthier. Watching Ronald McDonald jog alongside Bob Greene establishes Pavlovian associations between hamburgers and exercise that will make our kids salivate every time they approach the playground.

To paraphrase Postman, the problem is not what we eat at these fast food restaurants, it’s that we go to them in the first place, that we have ceded control of our food supplies to these giants. McDonald’s has become the largest purchaser of apples in the United States. As with its potato suppliers, McDonald’s demands a uniform product, which leads to a further reduction in biodiversity. The structure of the fast food economy militates against dietary diversity, not to mention eating local, eating organic, or just plain eating well.

Corporate advisors like Dean Ornish rel-

ish the opportunity to have a large impact on diets by shifting the priorities of entities the size of McDonald’s. But the size of McDonald’s is part of the problem. Because of its market dominance, it begins to define what a healthy, balanced lifestyle is, which inevitably involves its entire menu. Maybe it was better when chains weren’t experiencing an identity crisis, when we could go to them for our junk food fix and not be gulled into ascribing higher motives to the excursion.

Or perhaps we don’t need to worry after all. The giant hamburger is, was, and always will be the symbol of fast food restaurants. Consider my experience with the McDonald’s media website. Before I could access the graphics and text, I was required to sign up for a log-on name and a password, neither of which I was able to choose for myself. After a brief interval, McDonald’s sent me an email with my brand new secret information.

User ID: fries748

Password: burger18fries

That’s the McDonald’s I can relate to – staying on message.

John Feffer is working on a book about the global politics of food. This essay originally appeared at alternet.com



*“It can get rough out here.
It’s not unheard of for a skipper
to shoot out the lights of another boat
when it gets too close.”*



CASPAR GREEFF

Smoke on the water

*On board the chokka fleets off Port Elizabeth,
South Africa, nocturnal fishermen strain
sinew and muscle to catch squid for
European dinner tables*

We hadn’t even made it out of the harbour before we had to turn back. Something was caught in the propeller, and a frogman was summoned. He dived off the harbour wall, and surfaced a few times, asking for various implements – knives, a saw, a hammer.

“There’s always complications,” said Kevin Mears, one of the 14 crew aboard the *Dolce Vita*. “You opt for a simple life as a fisherman, and what do you get? Complications. If it’s not something technical, it’s the weather or the fish.”

After 40 minutes, the frogman managed to cut loose the snarl of rope tangled around the propeller, and we had permission to leave Port Elizabeth harbour, again.

The shore skipper, Brian Mears – Kevin’s

uncle – told *Dolce Vita*’s skipper, Shane Slabbert: “Shane, once you’re out, feel it. If it’s right, toot twice on your horn.”

We got past the breakwater, Slabbert gave two toots and we were at sea, in search of strange creatures. We were hunting *Loligo vulgaris reynaudii* – chokka squid. They grow up to 45cm long, have 10 tentacles, three hearts, and blood that is blue. They have parrot-like beaks, astonishingly large eyes, and squirt ink out of their anuses. They are cannibals, and have the ability to change colour.

They are very tasty, but you are unlikely to be served chokka squid at your local seafood restaurant – 99.9% of the catch is exported to Italy and Spain.

Port Elizabeth is at the heart of South Africa’s chokka fishing industry, and *Dolce Vita* is one of 128 boats that have a permit to catch the rubbery cephalopods. At night in PE you can stand on Humewood Beach and see the lights of the chokka boats in the distance. They look like a space station

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in the darkness where sea and sky merge.

But that night the Dolce Vita's lights would have been invisible to anyone on the beach – we were going about 45km out to sea. “We’ll just chug along for a few hours,” said Slabbert, hands on the wheel, looking at his echo sounder, and plotting a course on the GPS. It was three in the afternoon, and most of the crew were in their cramped quarters in the fo’c’s’le. They come out shortly before sunset, when the Dolce Vita's eight two-kilowatt lights are turned on to attract the shoals of baitfish on which the chokka feed.

The cook, Keith Juries, was busy in the tiny galley, preparing supper. “We’re going to be eating chicken and chips. Usually it’s boiled beans.”

We would be on the boat for only 24 hours. The crew were going to be at sea for 21 days. The industry employs 2400 fishermen, who spend up to 240 days a year at sea. They are at the bottom of a food chain that ends with an exquisite delicacy served on plates in Europe.

This year, chokka is selling for R23/kg. The fishermen are paid R4.50 for every kilogram they catch. A good fisherman can make R50,000 [\$US8,000] in a year, but it’s brutally hard work, in grim and sometimes life-threatening conditions.

Every year a handful of chokka fishermen fall overboard and are never seen again. In May this year, 14 trawlermen died when a container ship collided with their vessel off Port Elizabeth.

The few crew members on the deck of the 14m Dolce Vita were preparing their lines for the night’s fishing. They catch chokka with hand lines on which two jigs

are attached. The jigs are brightly coloured lures with two cruel carousels – circles of hooks that the chokka grasp with their tentacles.

We ploughed through a glassy sea, and, as night fell, the crew ate their battered chicken and greasy chips in silence. Then it was time to release the large red and white parachute that served as our sea anchor, allowing us to drift with the current.

Once this was done, Slabbert switched on the powerful, balloon-shaped lights – two rows of four dangling from lines above the deck on either side of the boat – and we blazed in the blackness.

We could see the lights of 10 other chokka boats, but we kept our distance.

“It can get rough out here,” said Slabbert. “It’s not unheard of for a skipper to shoot out the lights of another boat when it gets too close.”

The 13 fishermen were now all at their stations, wearing woollen caps, oilskins, tatty jerseys, and gumboots. Their faces were etched by years at sea; a couple had been scarred by knives.

They stood at the gunwale and flung their double-jigged lines into the ink-black water. Each fisherman had two lines, and once he had flung them, he tapped each one with his ring finger, feeling for the tiny vibrations that would indicate a squid on the jig. The boat bobbed and swayed. There was the smell of diesel, the hum of the generator and the swish and plop of the fishing lines. Looking down the deck, a row of hands could be seen on the gunwale, ring fingers obsessively tapping.

No chokka, though.

“They’re not in a feeding mood tonight,”

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said Mears, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, a line in each hand. “I wish they would bite madly so you guys could get a good taste of it.”

A qualified draughtsman, Mears has been a chokka fisherman for a year. He enjoys being out at sea, likes the 21-day trips that “are so long you can start missing someone”. For most of the fishermen, who have at best a rudimentary schooling, it’s a hard grind, the only job they can get.

It’s small wonder that chokka fishermen have a reputation as hell-raisers on shore. Players in the industry told us the fishermen blow their money on “casinos, women and liquor”; that “for them, there is no tomorrow”.

After an hour or so of fruitless flinging, the chokka started to bite. The fishermen swiftly hauled their lines in, and when the chokka were out of the water, let them dangle for a few moments, to avoid being squirted in the face. Then they brought the alien-looking creatures, all eyes and tentacles and startled expressions, on board, gave the jig a little twist and dropped the chokka into a crate.

“It’s weird how they change colour,” said Mears, flicking one off his jig. “Sometimes they go gold, sometimes they go red. It looks like they’re supercharged with electricity.”

At about 1.30am a big red half-moon rose above us and the chokka started biting big time. You had to duck often to avoid getting squirted by them. Mears gave me a line, and I tried my hand at chokka fishing.

It was something of a bloody business as I flung a jig into my fingers, but after several attempts I managed to reach the sea. I tickled the line, felt an almost imperceptible change of tension on it and hauled in frantically. But there was nothing at the end of it – what I had felt was a change in the current.

After a couple of hours of flinging the line, tapping it and hauling it in, I caught a chokka. It squirted me in the face and looked like it was shrieking silently as I dropped it into Mears’s crate, which was almost full. The boat drifted and the long night passed, and by the time the sun rose, I had caught a couple of dozen squid.

When Slabbert turned the lights off, the crew had been fishing non-stop for 11 hours and had earned between R150 and R300 for it. They sorted the chokka and after that the crates were labelled, sealed, and blast-frozen at -37°C .

Slabbert turned the boat around to drop us off at PE harbour. The wind came up and the sea showed us a fraction of its might.

Brian Mears was waiting for us at the harbour. “I can hardly walk,” I told him as we got off the *Dolce Vita*, “because the jetty is swaying so much. There’s only one way to stop the land from swaying,” he said. So we went to the yacht club and had a couple of stiff whiskies.

Casper Greeff is a feature writer for the Johannesburg Sunday Times, in which this article was first published.



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“Another soldier says detainees were beaten with a broken chemical light stick: “That made them glow in the dark, which was real funny, but it burned their eyes, and their skin was irritated real bad.”



TED RALL

Who did you torture during the war, daddy?

I never miss the Saturday paper. Because it's the skimpiest and least-circulated edition of the week, it's the venue of choice for lowballing the stories the government can't completely cover up. September 24's New York Times, for example, contained the bombshell revelation that the U.S. government continues to torture innocent men, women and children in Iraq.

An army captain and two sergeants from the elite 82nd Airborne Division confirm previous reports that Bagram and other concentration camps in U.S.-occupied Afghanistan are a kind of Torture University where American troops are taught how to abuse prisoners who have neither been charged with nor found guilty of any crime. “The soldiers told Human Rights Watch that while they were serving in Afghanistan,” reports The Times, “they learned the stress techniques [sic] from watching Central Intelligence Agency operatives interrogating prisoners.” Veterans who

served as prison guards in Afghanistan went on to apply their newfound knowledge at Abu Ghraib and other facilities in U.S.-occupied Iraq.

One of the sergeants, his name withheld to protect him from Pentagon reprisals, confirms that torture continued even after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke. “We still did it, but we were careful,” he told HRW.

The latest sordid revelations concern Tiger Base on the border with Syria, and Camp Mercury, near Fallujah, the Iraqi city leveled by U.S. bombs in a campaign that officials claimed would finish off the insurgent movement. After the army told him to shut up over the course of 17 months – tacit proof that the top brass condones torture – a frustrated Captain Ian Fishback wrote to two conservative Republican senators to tell them about the “death threats, beatings, broken bones, murder, exposure to elements, extreme forced physical exertion, hostage-taking, stripping, sleep deprivation and degrading treatment” carried out

against Afghans and Iraqis unlucky enough to fall into American hands.

“We would give them blows to the head, chest, legs and stomach, and pull them down, kick dirt on them,” one sergeant said. “This happened every day . . . We did it for amusement.” Another soldier says detainees were beaten with a broken chemical light stick: “That made them glow in the dark, which was real funny, but it burned their eyes, and their skin was irritated real bad.” An off-duty cook told an Iraqi prisoner “to bend over and broke the guy’s leg with a . . . metal bat.” The sergeant continues: “I know that now. It was wrong. There are a set of standards. But you gotta understand, this was the norm.”

Torture, condemned by civilized nations and their citizens since the Renaissance, has continued to be carried out in prisons and internment camps in every nation. But save for a few exceptions, such as France’s overt torture of Algerian independence fighters during the late 1950s, it has been hidden away, lied about and condemned when exposed. Torture is shameful. It is never official policy.

That changed in the United States after 9/11. Current attorney general Alberto Gonzales authored a convoluted legal memo to George W. Bush justifying torture. Defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld joked about forcing prisoners to stand all day and officially sanctioned keeping them naked and threatening them with vicious dogs. Ultimately Bush declared that U.S. forces in Afghanistan would ignore the Geneva Conventions. By 2004 a third of Americans told pollsters that they didn’t have a problem with torture.

Torture has been normalized.

By Monday, September 26, the story of torture at Camps Tiger and Mercury to which New York Times editors had granted page one treatment two days earlier had vanished entirely. Only a few papers, such as the Seattle Times and Los Angeles Times, ran follow-ups.

In his 2000 book “Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture” John Conroy presciently describes the surprising means by which democracies are actually more susceptible to becoming “torture societies” than dictatorships: Where “notorious regimes have fallen, there has been a public acknowledgement that people were tortured. In democracies of long standing in which torture has taken place, however, denial takes hold and official acknowledgement is extremely slow in coming, if it appears at all.” Conroy goes on to describe the “fairly predictable” stages of governmental response:

First, writes Conroy, comes “absolute and complete denial.” Rumsfeld told Congress in 2004 that the U.S. had followed Geneva “to the letter” in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“The second stage,” he says, is “to minimize the abuse.” Republican mouthpiece Rush Limbaugh compared the murder and mayhem at Abu Ghraib to fraternity hazing rituals.

Next is “to disparage the victims.” Bush Administration officials and right-wing pundits call the victims of torture in U.S. custody “terrorists,” implying that detainees – who are not charged because there is no evidence against them – deserve whatever they get. Dick Cheney called vic-

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tims of torture at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (who, under U.S. law, are presumed innocent) “the worst of a very bad lot.” Rumsfeld called them “the worst of the worst.”

Other government tactics include charging “that those who take up the cause of those tortured are aiding the enemies of the state” (Right-wing bloggers have smeared me as a “terrorist sympathizer” because I argue against torture); denying that torture is still occurring (numerous Bush Administration officials claimed that Abu Ghraib marked the end of the practice); placing “the blame on a few bad apples” (the classic Fox News-Bush trope); and pointing out that “someone else does or has done much worse things” (the beheadings of Western hostages by Iraqi jihadi organizations was used to justify torturing Iraqis who didn’t belong to those groups).

Bear in mind: Conroy wrote his book in 2000, before Bush seized power and more than a year before 9/11 was given as a pretext for legalizing torture.

Citing the case of widespread and proven torture of arrestees by Chicago cops, Conroy noted: “It wasn’t a case of five people . . . doing nothing or acting slowly, it was a case of millions of people knowing of an emergency and doing nothing. People looked about, saw no great crusade forming, saw protests only from the usual agitators, and assumed there was no cause for alarm. Responsibility was diffused. Citizens offended by torture could easily retreat into the notion that they lived in a just world, that the experts would sort things out.”

Ted Rall is a syndicated columnist whose work appears in almost 100 North American publications.



“An America that tortures and murders while preaching ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ is a nation that lives in a make-believe world, a bully world.”



JOHN S. HATCH

Absurdities and atrocities

Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities- Voltaire

Absurdities and atrocities have come to largely define America in the new millennium. Who would have thought that the United States of America would embrace the practice of torture as a matter of policy? Torture, with all its grim, sadistic, soul destroying, screaming implications. The President endorses torture. The Attorney General made it possible. President Karimov of Uzbekistan boils enemies alive. ‘Blowtorch Bob’ D’Aubisson of El Salvador loved to burn people. Ronnie Reagan had nuns raped. It was called ‘fighting for freedom’. George is a freedom fighter right up there with the best of them. The shah was a freedom fighter. General Noriega, to a point. Pinochet. Enemies of the US hate it for its ‘freedom’.

Damn right. Freedom from the rule of law. America recently advanced ‘freedom’

by sodomizing young boys at Abu Ghraib, where they torture children to manipulate their parents. Did you hear that? Americans torture innocent children in front of their parents to intimidate them. Is that possible? Now certain ‘leaders’ are hoping that the tape of that advancement doesn’t get out. Too much freedom can be a bad thing after all.

To date, none of America’s religious leaders have spoken out against the use of torture, or the wanton abrogation of civil liberties in America or Guantanamo. Okay, maybe a few Lutherans whispered something, and good for them. But where’s Jerry Falwell? Franklin Graham? (He thinks Islam is evil.) Pat Robertson? (He wants to assassinate Hugo Chavez.) Where are the Catholic bishops? We know the pope has diplomatic immunity, so he can’t be held accountable for covering up sex crimes against children, but where are the priests? The ministers? The good people?

If organized religion can’t or won’t stand

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up to the kind of immorality that is so patently being practiced by the Bush Administration – do you suppose that Jesus would endorse torture? If Christianity has no problem with torture or for that matter the wholesale slaughter of innocents in Iraq – if Christianity has no issue with war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture, rape and murder, then perhaps that religion does not have very much to offer in terms of moral values or teaching. Its silence has been louder than any prayer or hymn.

Maybe George is a little hard of hearing and God is actually telling him to fuck off.

Indeed, an America that tortures and murders while preaching ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ is a nation that lives in a make-believe world, a bully world. America has always been good at the superficial, empty slogan. ‘Land of the Free’ ‘Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death’ ‘Jesus Loves You’. Repeat after me: ‘We’re Number One! We’re Number One!’ Why is no one saying that a nation that would deploy depleted uranium weapons or snipers positioned on rooftops to shoot civilians and even ambulances, or a brand new version of napalm, or cluster bombs, a nation that through ineffective sanctions extinguished the lives of five hundred thousand Iraqi babies (and whose former Secretary of State declared it ‘worth it’.

Perhaps even Hitler was not quite so cold), is anyone saying that such a nation is committing evil, that its leaders are committing acts of vile terrorism that shame all humanity and must not go unpunished?

Remember, there were no Weapons of Mass Destruction. None. There were

inspections. Bush put a stop to them. Colin Powell lied. Condoleezza Rice lied. The mushroom cloud was only in her brain. Dick Cheney lied. Bush, of course, lied and lied and lied.

As has been so often the case, America encouraged a bully, armed a bully, even gave him poison gas. When Saddam used it against the Iranians (‘I only wish both sides could lose’ – Kissinger) that was fine. When he used it against the Kurds, that was still fine, until it became convenient years later to call it a crime, which of course it was. You’d think that boiling people alive would be disapproved of also, but it didn’t prevent President Karimov from being feted at the White house by his good friend. I don’t know if Karimov is a Christian (maybe not) but George certainly claims to be. It’s funny how easily Christianity seems to accommodate killing.

Anyway, yesterday’s friend is tomorrow’s terrorist a la Saddam, I guess. Clever to charge him with capital crimes that have nothing to do with America. He can be quietly dispatched to Allah or wherever without disturbing implications. Will his good friend Donald Rumsfeld pray for him?

So, no WMD, no mushroom clouds (except in Dr. Condi’s fetid mind), no missiles raining down on ‘Merica, no nothing. But before he even stole office, Bush wanted to invade Iraq. His people were hoping for, his people needed a new Pearl Harbor event as they called it, something pretty big, shock ‘n awe to mobilize the American people, to soften ‘em up to George’s way of thinking. In one fell swoop of Shock ‘n Awe he’d show Poppy a thing or two, and become an instant Middle East muscle-

man. He just needed a darned event, that's all. Well, he got his wish.

Such is the advanced state of aviation in the USA that if a jet strays off course, or if a transponder is switched off for some reason, those facts are immediately known on the ground. Should a catastrophic event such as sudden deadly decompression occur, or a hijacking, fighter jets can be scrambled and on the scene to investigate within minutes. None of this happened on the eleventh of September 2001. Contrary to normal protocol, aircraft were allowed to fly unimpeded into their targets at the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. They could have been stopped. On orders from the highest levels in the White House, they were not. Bush needed a new Pearl Harbor. He got it. If the administration had foreknowledge of the desired PH event, it would not be without precedent.

Remember Operation Northwoods? During the Kennedy administration the entire contingent of Joint Chiefs of Staff, led by demented right-wing wacko General Lyman Lemnitzer endorsed a plan to kill a large number of American citizens and make it look like the work of Fidel Castro, thus softening up the public for an invasion of Cuba. Does it sound unconscionable? Straussian? Of course. So is sodomizing little boys at Abu Ghraib. These brave military men were willing to sacrifice innocent American lives (not their own of course) to the presumably greater good of getting rid of Castro and restoring Cuba to the Mafia, perhaps, just like in the good old days.

So was 9-11 a merely fortuitous occurrence from Bush's point of view? Or did someone help it happen? The absence of military intervention sure looks suspicious, as did the way the buildings came down, so reminiscent of controlled demolition. Even as a result of much hotter fires, no buildings in the world have ever collapsed in that manner. Pearl Harbor indeed.

One of the most astonishing aspects of the Bush-Cheney putsch (and that's exactly what it was) is that it gave the lie to so much that Americans believed about themselves. Free. Proud. Strong. Live free or die. So much talk about freedom and democracy and goodness and the American Way. All nonsense. All swept away like so much dust. And all it took was a befuddled, deluded ex-drunk christian cowboy wannabe and a few evil handlers. Given the 'freedom rhetoric', one would have expected another civil war in the defense of the nation, but there was barely a whimper as America expired under the weight of the Patriot Act, the suspension of civil rights, habeas corpus and the rule of law, under the weight of crimes against humanity and war crimes being committed in the name of every single American citizen. The American dream was just a vacuous stupor. Now it's become a nightmare, perhaps one without end.

*John S. Hatch is a Vancouver writer and film-maker. He can be reached at johnhatch@canada.com
<http://www.jhatchfilms.citymax.com>*



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“I think there are moral issues when you’re reporting people’s deaths. I think we journalists can afford to be angry. You know, we’re not mouthpieces for government, or we shouldn’t be.”



SHAUN CARNEY

Robert Fisk's crazy vocation

When you shake hands with Robert Fisk, it is difficult not to think of Osama bin Laden. After all, Fisk has met bin Laden three times, the last time eight years ago, in Afghanistan. So this right hand of Fisk’s, gripping mine as we were introduced in Melbourne, has also gripped the hand of one of this century’s monsters.

Fisk’s meetings with the al-Qaeda leader were more than fleeting encounters. Each time the two men met, Fisk interviewed bin Laden and at each progressive meeting, the world’s most wanted man presented an increasingly threatening and paranoid view of power relationships across the planet. On September 11, 2001, Fisk knew enough about the terrorist leader’s intentions to be able to conclude immediately that al-Qaeda was behind the attacks on New York and Washington.

Fisk has covered the Middle East for 29 years, first for The Times and, since 1989, for one of its rivals, The Independent. Before

he was posted to Beirut, he had been based in Belfast, covering the Troubles in Northern Ireland. He has seen a lot of suffering and a lot of violence. With his colleague Patrick Cockburn, Fisk covers the occupation of Iraq for his newspaper. Later this year he will return to Baghdad, where he will eschew what he refers to as “hotel journalism” and its reliance on official statements and sources, and go into the streets and shops and write stories about ordinary Iraqis.

But Fisk’s journalism is of a certain style. His highly personalised reporting and commentary has made him a favourite target of bloggers and conservative columnists. Depending on who is attacking him, Fisk is variously anti-Western, pro-Palestinian, pro-Taliban, pro-Saddam. When he was beaten up by a group of enraged Afghan refugees in Pakistan in late 2001 and subsequently wrote that he could understand the anger that had led to assault, he was ridiculed by some in the media and on the

internet. Actor John Malkovich once said that he would like to shoot Fisk.

At the city restaurant where we met, it was hard to consider that this 59-year-old with the thinning mop of white hair, glasses perched on his nose, slightly ruddy face, pressed check cotton shirt and neat southern English vowels was a hate figure for so many.

Fisk had arrived in Australia to give a series of talks and also to promote his new book, a massive tome 29 years in the making called *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*. In it, Fisk attempts to gather up everything he has seen and learnt since first arriving in Beirut.

Does he accept the suggestion that he is an advocate as a journalist? “I think I do maintain an objective distance. I mean, I go to a place, I see a massacre and I have a pretty good idea who did it and I say so. If you’re covering the slave trade in the 18th century, do you give equal time to the slave ship captain or more time to the slaves? If you’re present at the liberation of a concentration camp, do you give equal time to the SS guards?”

“I think there are moral issues when you’re reporting people’s deaths. I think we journalists can afford to be angry. You know, we’re not mouthpieces for government, or we shouldn’t be. It seems to me that if you’re going to be covering a story like Iraq, which is a massive historical tragedy, especially for the Iraqis, you’ve got to tell it like it is.

“I’ve got the great advantage of news reporting. I go to bus bombings in Iraq. I’m outraged at what I see. Morally, if you go and see some terrible crime against

humanity – and I call September 11, 2001, an international crime against humanity – if you’re just there and you’re a car parking attendant, say, and you see it, you’re going to be outraged. Have we got to switch that off because we are journalists? I don’t think so.”

Another British-born journalist, Christopher Hitchens, has famously moved away from the left as a consequence of September 11. Fisk says that he felt himself being pulled in an unexpected direction on that day, but it was not on the left-right continuum.

“On September 11, I was in a plane above the Atlantic going from Europe to the States and I was on the satellite phone talking to London and they were telling me ‘another plane’ and then ‘another plane’, so I went to the purser and he brought the captain back. I turned to the stewardess and said, ‘What do you think?’ and she said, ‘They must have wanted to kill themselves. There must have been a lot of planning, a lot of dummy runs.’

“And the purser and I looked at each other: ‘Who’s on our plane?’ And we walked around that plane together looking for people we didn’t like. And I came up with 13 or 14 people, dusky Middle Eastern appearance and either because they were reading the Koran or they had worry beads or they looked at me suspiciously, I had become a racist in one minute. That’s what bin Laden had done. And that’s what we were meant to do, if you know what I mean.”

Fisk’s assessment of the situation in Iraq, and indeed of the world, as a consequence of events in the Middle East in recent years,

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is avowedly pessimistic. “The Americans must leave. And the Americans will leave. But the Americans can’t leave. And that’s the equation that turns sand into blood. Apart from the Kurds, I don’t find anyone who wants the Americans to stay, whether it be the guy who serves me in the restaurant, or the guy who cleans the pool or the guy who sells me pot plants for the balcony. Clearly it’s a failure. No weapons of mass destruction. Democracy in the fire? These people are not talking about their draft constitution, they are trying to live with no services, trying to stay alive. Trying Saddam? This is stories to frighten children, like us. It’s not important to Iraqis. He’s way in the past.” That last comment will surely attract the attention of his critics.

Fisk believes there is still a reasonable amount of good, fearless journalism going on – he cites Seymour Hersh’s reports on the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison as the best example – but is critical of the spread of what he regards as American-style reporting that’s tentative, hedged and limited by obedience to public officials.

He says The New York Times should change its name to “comma, officials say, full stop”. “Newspapers have this thing where every three years, just when (their correspondents) learned the language and got to know the place they pull you out and send you somewhere else. You know, ‘They’ve been there so long, they’re going to go native.’ Bullshit! I’m not going to go native when it’s so dangerous. Give me a break. The interesting thing is that when I talk to my American colleagues, we can have dinner and they’re very interesting

but when I open the paper, they’re not very interesting because they have suppressed everything from their report that might suggest they have an opinion. What’s the point of having a reporter as the nerve ending, thousands of miles from your paper if you’re not going to put in what he thinks?”

So what does he see as the real purpose of journalism? “Look, I’ll tell you what I think. I’m not trying to compare it with medicine, say, but journalism should be more than earning your money for Pellegrino or working in a bank or driving a bus. It should be a vocation. And if it’s not, what are you doing it for?”

At this point of the interview, the restaurant staff dropped something at the waiters’ station making a sharp, banging sound, and Fisk instinctively jumps in his chair. I suggested that after only a few hours out of Beirut, he is still being desensitised. “It does happen. You see a lot of people in the world who think they’re going to live forever. They never contemplate the thought that they are going to die. And I do, ‘cause I have to all the time.

“When you see an awful lot of people dead, you realise how easy it is to die. When I see in the mortuary in Baghdad all these people, hands behind their back, shot through the head, (when) I see my colleagues dead, of course, it’s very easy to be killed.” He appears to genuinely shudder at the thought. “Oooohhh.”

Fisk has no interest in the internet or email, saying that it takes too much time. He takes pictures to go with his reports but none of that digital stuff; he uses film. “I read all the time. Read books, read newspapers, read documents, read readers’ let-

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ters. Go and see the same contacts over and over again in every country you go to because they always know something new, and generally never sleep. I am exhausted all the time.

“Sometimes I used to think that I was privileged to see so much history. But I’m not sure it’s not a bit of a curse. Sometimes I see people in London or Melbourne on trains or in the streets, living their lives in safety with their families and I think ‘Hmm, not so bad’ but I chose my profession and I’ve stayed with it. I have a nice home in Beirut and I go out and go to concerts and films and restaurants.”

Just before the end of our lunch, our waitress, who had earlier told Fisk that she

was of Iranian descent, came by to see if everything was all right.

“Do you still speak Farsi?” Fisk asks. “I do a little bit, not very well,” she replies. Fisk then rolls out a sentence in Farsi. The young woman looks at him quizzically. “You think I’m crazy?”

“No, no,” says Fisk and he repeated the sentence emphasising each word. A look of recognition and a smile passes across the waitress’ face. “Oh, right,” she says. “You’re a crazy journalist. Oh, OK, I see.” Pleased, Robert Fisk grins as she walks away.

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BOOK REVIEW

“I would have done what they did. I would have attacked Robert Fisk. Or any other Westerner I could find.”



PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY

Making history on the front line

The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East

by Robert Fisk
Fourth Estate £25

This brilliant but enormous book (no less than 1366 pages) has been 16 years in the making. Its obvious ingredients are 328,000 notes, documents and dispatches and Robert Fisk’s thirty years’ experience of reporting the Middle East. But there is also a hidden element – the author’s ethical, philosophical and moral approach to his life’s work.

Fisk believes that most journalists who have reported from the tragedy-strewn and bloody countries of the Middle East have failed their readers and viewers. He has decided that they have been competent – even outstanding – in giving the who, how, where, what and when of events but have left out the “why”. He says that every journalist in the Middle East needs to walk

around with a history book in his back pocket to remind him or her why we got to where we are; why the injustices and horrors of yesteryear are engraved in the people’s minds and why they have a powerful influence on what happens next. This conviction was put to the test in a most personal manner. Fisk was on the Afghanistan border in November 2001 when a crowd of refugees from the American bombing turned on him and began to stone him. His head was split open, blood clouded his vision and for a while it looked as if he might not survive. He fought back and then realised what he was doing. “What had I done? I kept asking myself. I had been hurting and attacking and punching the very people I had been writing about for so long, the very dispossessed, mutilated people whom my own country – among others – had been killing. . . God spare me, I thought. The men whose families our bombers were killing were now my enemies too.” He escaped and decided he

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would not be able to live with himself unless he stuck to his convictions and explained to his readers why the Afghan crowd had attacked him. So he wrote about the humiliation and misery of the Muslim world and how the determination of the Alliance that “good” must triumph over “evil” even if it meant burning and maiming civilians and their families.

He concluded that if he were an Afghan refugee, “I would have done what they did. I would have attacked Robert Fisk. Or any other Westerner I could find.” It is a measure of how intensely Fisk is hated by some that his mail included unsigned Christmas cards regretting that the Afghans had not finished the job. Americans were particularly vicious. The Wall Street Journal carried an article which was headed “A self-loathing multiculturalist gets his due.” The Canadian/American columnist, the pugilistic Mark Steyn, wrote of Fisk’s account of his ordeal, “You’d have to have a heart of stone not to weep with laughter.” It is not only Fisk’s efforts to explain the Muslim side of events but to understand them that makes him enemies. He is also seen as an apologist for the West’s worst bogeyman, Osama bin Laden. Fisk has interviewed bin Laden three times, once in the Sudan and twice in Afghanistan. The two men got on well, even though Fisk says that bin Laden tried to recruit him. From Fisk’s description of the meetings we get an impression of the man very different from the one generally disseminated in the West. Fisk says bin Laden is devout, shy, thoughtful and like Bush and Blair possesses that dangerous quality – total self-conviction. Fisk says bin Laden has an almost obsessive interest in

history and believes that it is working against the United States for whom hatred “lies like blanket” over the Middle East.

Fisk got his break on The Times in its glory days when, aged only 29, the then foreign editor Louis Heren, offered him the Middle East as his beat. He had the temperament for the job – adventurous but not foolhardy: “There is a little Somme waiting for all innocent journalists.” He stayed with The Times for 18 years and says it was always loyal to him and that he had great trust in its editors.

Then in July 1988 a story he had written for The Times, the results of his investigation into the shooting down of an Iranian Airbus by the American warship Vincennes, killing 290 passengers and crew, was cut and changed, its meaning distorted by omission. “This, I felt sure was the result of Murdoch’s ownership of The Times . . . Readers of The Times had been solemnly presented with a fraudulent version of the truth.” So he resigned and went to the work for The Independent where he remains today. In the book he justifies his long explanation of why he left The Times by writing – and any serious reporter has to agree with him – “When we journalists fail to get across the reality of events to our readers, we have not only failed in our job, we have also become a party to the events that we are supposed to be reporting.”

Fisk’s critics complain that he is not objective and detached. This is right. He is subjective and engaged. What’s wrong with that? We are talking here about different views on what journalists, especially foreign correspondents, are for. Fisk has thought a lot about this. He writes: “I sup-

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pose, in the end, we journalists try – or should try – to be the first impartial witnesses to history. If we have any reason for our existence, the least must be our ability to report history as it happens so that no one can say: ‘We didn’t know – no one told us.’ But he quickly realised that this is not enough. Our leaders present war as a drama, a battle of good versus unspeakable evil and demand that we are either with them or against them. They promise that with God on our side and minus a few hard-won civil liberties we will march to eventual victory. But, as Fisk points out, “War is not about victory or defeat but about death and the infliction of death. It represents the total failure of the human spirit.” Then one day he meets Amira Hass, an Israeli journalist whose articles on the occupied Palestinian territories Fisk rates

higher than anything written by non-Israeli reporters. She gives him a better definition of his duty – “Our job is to monitor the centres of power”. So he began to challenge authority, all authority, “especially when governments and politicians take us to war, when they decide that they will kill and others will die.”

He continues to fulfill this duty with passion and anger. As he admits, his work, especially in this powerfully-written book, is filled with accounts of horror, pain and injustice. His triumph is that he has turned a slightly dubious and over-romanticised craft into a honorable vocation.

Phillip Knightley's books include 'The First Casualty: the war correspondent as hero, propagandist and myth-maker' (Andre Deutsch)



“Most people I talk to have been troubled and puzzled by Judy’s seeming ability to operate outside of conventional reportorial channels and managerial controls.”



RORY O’CONNOR

Little Miss Run Amok

Of all the astonishments in the Judith Miller/New York Times chapters of the Plamegate affair, perhaps the most revelatory is the way Miller described herself and her activities within the paper’s supposedly staid, controlled newsroom.

As noted in the paper’s own long-awaited explanation of the affair, Miller called herself “Miss Run Amok.”

“I said, ‘What does that mean?’” former investigative editor Douglas Frantz, now managing editor at The Los Angeles Times, recalled. “And she said, ‘I can do whatever I want.’”

And so she did, time and again, according to the Times’s own coverage, “as the newspaper’s leaders, in taking what they considered to be a principled stand, ultimately left the major decisions in the case up to Ms. Miller, an intrepid reporter whom editors found hard to control.”

■ Editors like Frantz’ predecessor Stephen Engelberg, who damned Miller

with faint praise, remarking, “Like a lot of investigative reporters, Judy benefits from having an editor who’s very interested and involved with what she’s doing.”

■ Editors like onetime foreign editor Roger Cohen, who said, “I told her there was unease, discomfort, unhappiness over some of the coverage... There was concern that she’d been convinced in an unwarranted way, a way that was not holding up, of the possible existence of W.M.D.”

■ Editors like managing editor Jill Abramson, who when asked what she regretted about The Times’s handling of the Miller matter, answered, “The entire thing.” (Abramson also decried the fact that the paper’s news coverage of the Plamegate affair had been “constrained” and coldly refuted Miller’s assertion that she had “made a strong recommendation to my editor” that an article be pursued, but “was told no.” Abramson, Washington bureau chief at the time, said Miller never made any such recommendation.)

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■ Even editors like Times top dog Bill Keller, who “in one of his first personnel moves,” told Miller that she could no longer cover Iraq and weapons issues. Even so, Keller told his own reporters, “She kept kind of drifting on her own back into the national security realm.”

So much so, apparently, that Miller – who had been given Pentagon clearance to see secret information – wasn’t permitted to discuss some of the more sensitive items with her editors, who had no such clearance.

Miller admitted to the “Miss Run Amok” remark but told the Times she must have meant it as a joke, adding, “I have strong elbows, but I’m not a dope.” That much at least seems clear. So too does the fact that her friend in high places, Times publisher Arthur “Pinch” Sulzberger – who told his own paper “This car had her hand on the wheel because she was the one at risk” – not only allowed but enabled and encouraged her unusual behavior.

Sulzberger also regularly urged editorial page editor Gail Collins to devote space to Miller’s plight. Asked whether he had any regrets about the editorials, Sulzberger said no. “Judy deserved the support of the paper in this cause – and the editorial page is the right place for such support, not the news pages,” Sulzberger said. Miller added that the publisher’s support was invaluable. “He galvanized the editors, the senior editorial staff,” she said. “He metaphorically and literally put his arm around me.”

Meanwhile, however, the Times’s news reporting on the Miller case became ever more “constrained,” to employ Abramson’s term. Some Times reporters said their edi-

tors seemed reluctant to publish articles about certain aspects of the case. Richard W. Stevenson and other reporters in the Washington bureau wrote an article in July, about the role of Vice President Cheney’s senior aides, but it was not published. Stevenson said, “It was taken pretty clearly among us as a signal that we were cutting too close to the bone, that we were getting into an area that could complicate Judy’s situation.”

Then, in August, two other Times reporters (Douglas Jehl and David Johnston) sent a memo to Washington bureau chief Philip Taubman listing ideas for coverage of the case. Taubman said Times editor Keller did not want them pursued, however, adding that he felt bad for his reporters, but that he and other senior editors felt that they had no choice. “No editor wants to be in the position of keeping information out of the newspaper,” Taubman told the Times, explaining why he had done so. Both Taubman and Abramson described the overall situation as “excruciatingly difficult.” Todd S. Purdum, a Washington reporter for The Times, summed up the situation by saying, “Most people I talk to have been troubled and puzzled by Judy’s seeming ability to operate outside of conventional reportorial channels and managerial controls.”

No wonder that “Inside the newsroom, Miller was a divisive figure,” so much so that “A few colleagues refused to work with her.” Nonetheless, she “operated with a degree of autonomy rare at The Times.”

And no wonder that Miller felt the need for an escort when, on October 3, four days after leaving jail, she returned to the head-

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quarters of The New York Times on West 43rd Street.

Claudia Payne, a Times editor and a close friend of Miller, said, “Her paramount concern was how her actions would be viewed by her colleagues.”

As the Times account paints it, “Before entering the building, she called her friend Ms. Payne and asked her to come downstairs and escort her in. “She felt very frightened,” Ms. Payne said. “She felt very vulnerable.”

Once safely inside the newsroom, Miller made a speech claiming victories for press freedom. “Her colleagues responded with restrained applause, seemingly as mystified by the outcome of her case as the public,” said the Times account.

To which Miller added, “People were confused and perplexed, and I realized then that The Times and I hadn’t done a very good job of making people understand what has been accomplished.”

Despite the now-voluminous coverage from the heretofore largely silent paper of record, neither Miller nor the Times have yet to do a very good job of making any of us understand what has been accomplished. But this is much is now clear:

■ Despite Miller’s protestation, her ‘ordeal’ has not been a victory, either for journalists or for the public;

■ As its own belated news coverage noted, “Neither The Times nor its cause has emerged unbruised. Three courts, including the Supreme Court, declined to back Ms. Miller. Critics said The Times was protecting not a whistle-blower but an administration campaign intended to squelch dissent. The Times’s coverage of itself was under assault: While the editorial page had crusaded on Ms. Miller’s behalf, the news department had more than once been scooped on the paper’s own story, even including the news of Ms. Miller’s release from jail.”

■ Finally, let us not forget, as Miller put it in own words, “W.M.D. – I got it totally wrong. The analysts, the experts and the journalists who covered them – we were all wrong. If your sources are wrong, you are wrong.”

There’s a lesson in there somewhere – for all of us, even Miss Run Amok...

This and other articles by Rory O’Connor are available on his blog at www.roryoconnor.com



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