

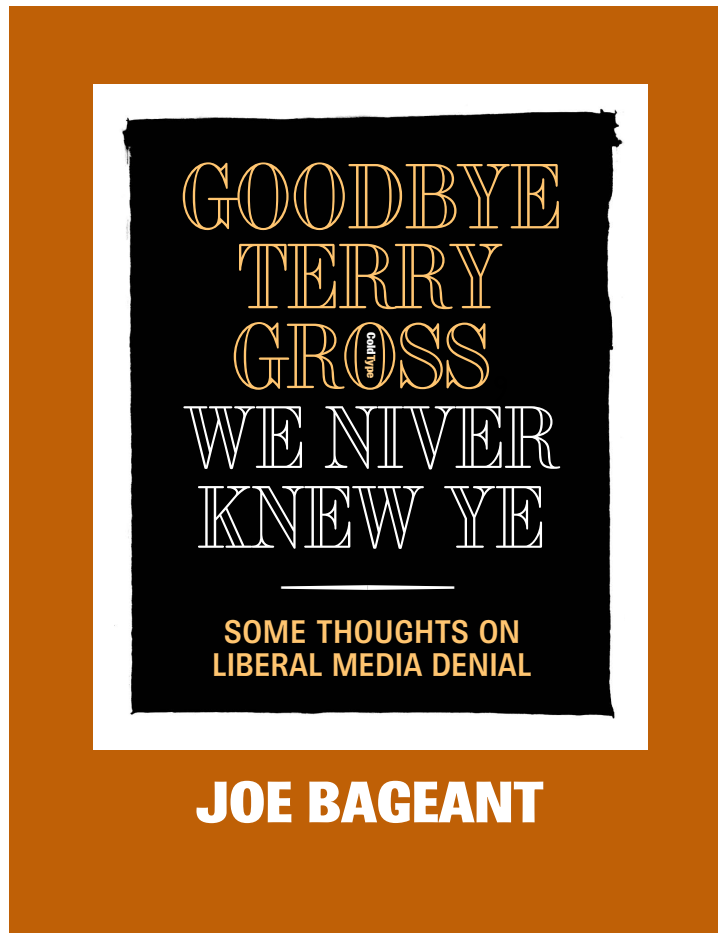
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SOME THOUGHTS ON
LIBERAL MEDIA DENIAL

JOE BAGEANT



Joe Bageant is a writer and magazine editor living in Winchester, Virginia. Random House Crown is publishing his forthcoming book:

**DRINK, PRAY, FIGHT AND FUCK:
Dispatches from America's Class Wars**

due out this year.

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come to understand that the mainstream media are in the business of selling fried chicken and cars, giving Wall Street head, and stealing bandwidth from the public's airwaves, none of us expect them to question anything afoot in the empire. We quite understand they cannot be wasting profitable air time on a nation whose collective memory is 30 seconds long. So we watch them pull their punches and wait for the commercials, which are their whole point anyway. If, god forbid, you are the pointy headed type interested in details, turn on NPR. And if you consider yourself hipper than the couch taters out here in Budland, go onto the net and visit Salon. Or if you are so worldly and hip you are a downright commie, then subscribe to Mother Jones. That's the way it used to be.

But now we are seeing what were once considered the more intelligent and in some cases more principled media such as NPR, Salon and Mother Jones distance themselves from meaningful controversy – pulling the few wimpy punches they have. (Bullshit controversy, however, is still in fashion.) We are talking about Mark Crispin Miller's new book, *Foiled Again – How the Right Stole the 2004 Election and Why They'll Steal the Next One, Too (Unless We Stop Them)*. Miller has become a known and respected progressive figure, one of the few in-your-face bespectacled lefty author types with any credibility.

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But when it comes to promoting *Foiled*, the guy can't even get arrested. No interviews, nothing. In fact, these days even his cash bounces – Miller can't even buy a spot on National Public Radio for his book. Now you may be saying to yourself: "Public Radio doesn't sell advertising." Which would make you one of those delusional souls who believe that shameless brand hawking by the oil companies and the financial establishment on NPR is not advertising. I mean, after all, ADM and Wal-Mart? NPR has sales people out chasing these sponsors. They sell these damned announcements. The only difference between NPR's "paid sponsorships" and the puke jock shows' commercial radio ads is that the NPR folks don't have a real rate card. Which is either stupid or brilliant, I'm not sure.

Anyway, when it comes to NPR and PBS, and especially Philadelphia's WHYY, Miller can't buy a date. As in the past, he attempted to sponsor spots on behalf of his newest book. And WHYY accepted the sponsorship. But then aaaaaaaagh! There came the sweaty excuse ridden attempts to back out on their end. Various excuses included that the book was too old (it was out two months) and that it was a paid political ad, (it supports no candidate.) Ultimately NPR and PBS have pretty much told Miller to go to hell.

It is safe to say that WHYY and the rest of the public media gang is purely are simply scared to death of uttering the book's title on the airwaves. They know that the neocons will jump up all over their asses claiming liberal bias. Maybe even launch one of their infamous letter writing campaigns. The Republican game plan of unrelenting bullshit, that steady grinding away day in day out ... it works. They have managed to wear down those media they don't already control from the top, make them either doubt themselves or make them damned afraid of repercussions. We can well imagine what the GOP assault on public radio and television has created around places like WHYY. Hell, if they can get Bill Moyers they can get anybody. Right?

WHYY would not accept Miller's sponsorship on behalf of *Foiled* on the grounds that it was a paid political message. By golly, it was a matter of principle! That's what it was! We won't take just anybody's money. Yeah, right. If you've ever suffered through a pledge drive you know that the brass at NPR would put Terry Gross and Nina Totenberg out on the street as workin' girls if they thought could it would bring in another couple of hundred. But honestly speaking, the facts are as WHYY claims. The station does not accept political ads. It only accepts paid advertisements for

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commercial products. Which is exactly what the sponsorship of Miller's book is.

Then there is that charge of it being old news. Hell, maybe the evolving corruption of our voting system is old news in a nation with said 30-second memory. Maybe the subversion of our government by an organized syndicate is not worthy of more than a few days media attention. Maybe that's why the book is not getting reviewed. But besides treading lightly around the neocon pit bulls, there is also that nagging issue of denial. To admit that two national elections were rigged shakes us to the bone.

Right now, between the Bush junta's bloody cry for an inquisition or at least universal surveillance and torture, and the Christian right's demented hallucinations of Kofi Anan as the anti-Christ (Honest to god, just look in the *Left Behind* books) we live in that bizarro world that often precedes fascism – that bizarro world in which every topic imaginable is politicized, and even not to speak represents taking a political stand.

Along with the passive denial of NPR, there is the active denial. We find characters like Salon's Farhad Manjoo who've lit into *Fooled Again* with a suspicious vengeance. In a way it is to be expected. Manjoo has practically made a career of writing in liberal venues that there is no odor of polecats in Ohio, Florida and elsewhere. Sometimes I think Salon keeps that boy around so the goppers can't cry bias. Hell, his first act was jumping Greg Palast for his groundbreaking exposure of the Republican election fraud in that first crooked election.

At any rate, here's a guy, Miller, with all the establishment credentials that NPR just eats up when they interview Heritage Foundation "experts." In fact, Mark Crispin Miller does a helluva job documenting his facts. Certainly as good as any of the aging Heritage Foundation gasbags NPR is so fond of for analysis. As in: Well Scott, actually this is not the first president to be caught pissing off the White House Portico and throwing empty liquor bottles at the passing public. . . In 1832 president Andrew Jackson . . . But for now Mark Crispin Miller can go sit in the corner with the other non grata folks like Howard Zinn and Gore Vidal. As one radio host put it, "Miller is too angry. It doesn't make for good radio."

Some listeners feel that NPR "does the best it can in this best of all possible worlds. Sometimes they're still pretty damn good." True enough. But in these times, being "sometimes good" is not good enough – not when the goddam republic is burning down. They too need to carry water buckets with the rest of us and quit imitating corporate media. But then, NPR and PBS are themselves big corporate media. They

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are big, they are a corporation and they are media. So much so that they run sappy feel good material worthy of the Rush Limbaugh or the Paul Harvey show. Material like “This I Believe” series. Tell you what I believe. I believe two national elections were rigged in this country. Millions of others believe the same. Tens of millions in fact. But most are in denial of what they deeply suspect and do not want to see verified.

Our national denial comes easily when everything converges to support it. First we had John Kerry’s quick concession of the election, lest a fellow Skull ‘n Boner accuse him of sour grapes. And looking about, none of our neighbors or colleagues seems worried about it. We are above all a mimicking species. Then there is the traditional press, from whom we’ve heard scarcely a chirp. Rather counter-intuitively, denial is especially easy for news reporters who can always fall back on “the facts” and the need for absolute proof. Proof being that someone is criminally charged with the very election fraud everyone is afraid to acknowledge because it is the death knell for any precious notions we’ve ever entertained about our system – the one system among all the troubled and grievously offensive governments on this planet, we have been told all our lives, that “works.” Acknowledging that it no longer works would mean fixing it, and fixing it calls for more strength and political will than Americans have ever shown. In fact, to be honest, when in your lifetime did ordinary Americans ever rise up together to stamp down or even point out corruption? I dare say never. It has always been the duty of the press or a few spectacularly brave individuals to call attention to such things. And on rare occasions the press has done just that. But this is not one of those occasions. Not for CBS, PBS or NPR. Especially not for NPR. Given that the Republicans have them by the nose hairs, it is easier, not to mention far safer, for everyone to deny that criminals operate within our political system and have established what amounts to a corporate/political underworld. We can smell it at every turn, and have seen its very reflection in those exit poll results.

Big corporate sponsors do nothing that does not yield a return on investment, nothing that doesn’t buy some desired result. Thus, denial and distraction are what those sponsorships from Hewlett Packard and Monsanto really buys. At the same time the denial is all but spotlighted with the fluff and slop that replaces real coverage and demonstrates cooperation to the administration and sponsors. Stuff like “This I Believe.” Or that overt sop, Marketplace, where happy jock stockbroker types Kai Ryssdal, and that hyperactive airhead in Texas (I forget his name) play pocket

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pool with each other over the day's market numbers, happily promoting the liberal capitalist notion that the second law of thermodynamics is false and that growth and consumption can be infinite in a world of diminishing resources.

NPR's own ombudsman admits that NPR, like the Fox and all the rest, skews towards conservative spokesmen. In fact, NPR so resembles the mainstream ditch these days that at least two of its major correspondents slipped comfortably enough right over into Fox News and were openly congratulated for it by fellow NPR broadcasters.

PBS increasingly depends on the teat of corporate underwriters. Consequently, we can expect to be force fed even more of the three tenors, the Lawrence Welk trio of the white middle class boomer generation. Meanwhile, as NPR whines under the table for scraps from the big dogs' plates, the Heritage Foundation spends \$30 million a year priming the info pumps of Fox and the other big guys.

All of which still leaves those crooked elections lingering as the backdrop to, or perhaps harbinger of, the 2008 elections, despite the lack of reporting on it. Reporters may perhaps be bound by a duty to refrain from assumptions. But I sure as hell ain't. And I'm assuming that if the Bush junta got away with it the first time, they will keep right on doing it until somebody breaks their goddamned legs. People like Katherine Harris, Karl Rove and Republican Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell haven't climbed to the top of the GOP dung heap because of their morals and restraint. They are big time Republicans precisely because they are willing to steal chickens and lie to the sheriff.

At some deep national level we all know, George W. Bush has no right to be farting into the oval room desk chair. Even the few genuinely moderate Republicans not driven into hiding by the Brownshirts look sheepish when you bring up Florida and Ohio. Yet Americans go on pretending that everything is OK. The people pretend along with the media that George W. Bush belongs in that chair. Pretend that his is the face of a man capable of deep and serious thought, that the smirk is not really a smirk and that he really gives a rat's ass about those coffins at Dover or those black people in New Orleans. They pretend that it was not farcical when he told the nation that despite the city being soaked in petro-toxins and defined mainly by bulldozed piles of rotting timbers, clothing and sewerage, overturned cars and botulism filled refrigerators, "New Orleans is still a great place to bring the family and have fun." They pretend that strange nationwide spider web of bitter GOP operatives

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could not possibly have worked together in Ohio and Florida and heaven only knows where else. Everything is OK.

As Helen Caldicott recently put it: “What’s to become of us? Ask any experienced mental health practitioner what happens to a person who constructs and tries to maintain a life based on denial of fundamental reality. It can be done for a while, in spite of occasional outbursts of behavioral oddities (remember Dr. Strangelove’s disobedient arm that was always popping up in an embarrassing Nazi salute). But how long can such a pretense be maintained, even when the pretender is surrounded by the best handlers money can buy?”

Apparently Helen, a damned long time. At least eight years.

By the way, if you wanna give WHYY hell personally, the phone number is (215) 351-1200. Email is talkback@whyy.org.

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