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Book Reviews: Subversive Fun

Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them
Al Franken

Stupid White Men
Michael Moore

Bushwhacked: Life in George W. Bush’s America
Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose
by Charles F. Angell

Despite complaints from conservative commentators of a liberal bias in the press and electronic media, liberal commentators like those reviewed here have begun to raise their voices and document how such right-wing conservatives as Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, Ann Coulter, and Rupert Murdoch through his newspapers and the Fox Network have managed to place their conservative agenda before the public. The recent CBS decision not to air a film biography of Ronald Reagan illustrates the influence conservative voices can exercise when they feel a fellow conservative is not receiving “fair and balanced” treatment. Ivins, Moore, and Franken raise their voices in protest against what they perceive as conservative distortions of and frequent disregard for the truth. Polemical and humorous, though differing intensities of anger often strain the humor, the three writers share a concern that, driven by money and an economic rationalist philosophy that claims the marketplace will always determine the most socially useful outcomes, the nation’s current politics will rend social contracts that have provided bedrock support for most Americans since at least the New Deal.

Al Franken’s LIES AND THE LYING LIARS WHO TELL THEM achieved notoriety when Bill O’Reilly of the O’Reilly Factor had his Fox Network employers enter a civil action claiming Franken had libeled him. In his chapter “Bill O’Reilly: Lying, Splotchy Bully,” Franken had accused O’Reilly of falsely taking credit for prestigious journalism awards that he had in fact not received. Confronted with his misrepresentations, O’Reilly refused to admit a mistake and berated Franken in a public forum. “There’s no shame in screwing up a statistic every now and then,” Franken notes. “People make mistakes. It’s just somewhere deep in O’Reilly’s psyche there’s clearly a terror of being proved wrong. When he’s confronted with a mistake, the bully comes out, and he bludgeons his guests with incorrect or just made-up facts and figures.” Fox executives were reluctant to initiate the libel action, but not wanting to antagonize O’Reilly whose contract—I believe I remember reading—was coming up for renewal, they filed. O’Reilly, one might say, bullied and bludgeoned his employer and, in a delicious irony, highlighted Franken’s point about him. The judge—a Clinton appointee?—found the case without merit and dismissed it.

Franken and his Harvard student researchers, TeamFranken he calls them, exhaustively catalogue the lies and distortions the right-wing media promulgates. He observes that Bush and other Republicans claimed during the 2000 campaign that the American military was unprepared to fight, that it had been “gutted” by Clinton administration policies; yet, less than two years after his election, Bush had the military engaged and victorious in Afghanistan and Iraq. Franken compares Bush budgets and policies to Clinton’s and substantiates that the Clinton administration had undertaken significant reforms in military procurement and preparedness that contributed to the military effectiveness in Afghanistan and Iraq. Franken cites instances where following 9/11 conservative politicians blamed Clinton for “de-emphasizing” the military (Orrin Hatch) or for Clinton’s “backing off, letting the Taliban go, over and over again” (Rep. Dana Rohrabacher). Conservatives have learned that in many parts of the country Clinton-bashing pays off in votes; Franken points out the extent of the fabrications employed to make the former president appear responsible for our current problems. (I can’t resist urging people to read a recent The American Prospect interview with
Bill Clinton as he evaluates the current political climate. The consequence of right-wing mendacity Franken concludes is that “all the lies, small and large, add up. They create a world view in which the mainstream media is a liberal propaganda machine... The right-wing media’s lies create a world in which no one needs to feel any obligation to anybody else. It’s a worldview designed to comfort the comfortable and further afflict the afflicted.”

Michael Moore, whose documentary *Bowling for Columbine* won him an Oscar and the right to afflict the sounds the same theme. In *STUPID WHITE MEN*, Moore, a less genial version of the Will Rogers humorist, purports to speak for the little guy, the average American, who he feels is a screwing from the unholy alliance of big business and big government. For Moore George W. Bush typifies the stupid white men for whom we are asked “to get up in the morning to work our asses off to produce goods and services that only serve to make the junta and its cohorts in Corporate America (a separate, autonomous fiefdom within the United States that has been allowed to run on its own for some time) even richer.” In his chapter “Idiot Nation,” Moore enumerates how politicians have failed the nation’s public schools. His list of failures is familiar: inadequate funding, depressed teacher salaries, deteriorating facilities, out-dated textbooks, corporate intrusion into the curriculum. Moore notes that “schools and corporations sometimes turn the school itself into one giant neon sign for corporate America. Appropriation of school space, including scoreboards, rooftops, walls, and textbooks, for corporate logos and advertising is up 559 percent.” (In Massachusetts budget shortfalls find some school districts contemplating advertising in school buses.) Citizens are forced to confront the issue George Bernard Shaw dramatized in *Major Barbara*: can or should an institution dedicated to relieving human misery (in Shaw’s drama the Salvation Army) accept funding from a source (Bodger’s Distillery) deeply complicit in causing that misery? Should or can schools dedicated both to educating informed citizens and pursuing the truth permit funding by commercial organizations dedicated to profit? Such questions invite no easy answers—see *Major Barbara*; yet schools desperate to leave no child behind and lacking the financial resources to help them catch up elide the question in the hope they can transform profit into wisdom. I find myself sympathetic to Moore’s advice to high-school students to subvert rather than submit. The brand of authority corporations peddle ought to be interrogated at every level and, if school officials in their quest for funding won’t confront squarely a corrupted bargain, the students certainly should.

Molly Ivins’ *BUSHWHACKED* sounds the same theme. In her chapter “Leave No Child Behind,” she writes “some critics would say that the Bushies believe education law should be written not only by big business but for big business. This is not new. Schools have always been profit centers for publishing companies. It’s no surprise that the business lobby has a pack of dogs in the education-legislation hunt.” Ivins focuses most sharply on the by now well-entrenched movement to use high-stakes standardized testing as the means for assessing students, teachers, and school districts. She cites researchers who have compared rising state test scores that show greatly improved student performance against more stable national norms that show only incremental, if any, improvement. The researchers conclude that the rising scores imply a shrinking population of test takers or, to state it differently, an increasing population of drop-outs, especially among minorities. (MCAS may soon compel Commonwealth educators to recognize this consequence.) Ivins also argues that corporations regard such high-stakes testing as necessary for training students with “basic literacy and number skills” to become workers who can “compete in the global market.” Corporations want workers, not citizens, and view schools as a humanpower resource. Corporate interests, while not completely opposed to education interests—every teacher understands that schooling should provide students with marketable skills—do conflict with broader social, political, and personal interests. A citizen is only partly a consumer, only partly a worker; Not all our time is spent in the workplace or at the mall.

Ivins quotes Mussolini who once remarked “Fascism should more properly be called corporatism, since it is the merger of state and corporate power.” At a time when some American corporations manage assets larger than those of many governments which gives them immense political power and access; when corporate executives (still mostly white males) move seamlessly between high corporate and political office and use their power to aggrandize themselves and their corporate interests (e.g. Kenneth Lay of Enron, Richard Cheney of Halliburton); and when these same executives and politicians justify their actions by a pervasive economic rationalism which holds that the market will produce the best decisions, at such a time schools should be educating citizens to question loud and long. But as Franken, Moore, and Ivins all in different ways point out, Americans are an optimistic and trusting people. Maybe we’ll only need to worry when the trains (and planes) start to run on time.

—Charles F. Angell is Professor of English