

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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Friday, June 20, 2003

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED JANUARY 15, 1997

IS THE NEW YORK TIMES BEING DUPED BY RIGHT WING NUTS?

Mark L. Melcher

There's a new conspiracy theory afoot in the land. It is not clear that we needed another one. But we have it, nonetheless. This one has nothing to do with such tried and true conspiracy topics as the assassination of President Kennedy, the burglaries at the Watergate hotel, or even the more up-to-date ones that deal with the death of former Commerce Secretary Ron Brown or the crash last year of TWA flight 800. Nor are its origins murky, as is the case with most conspiracy theories.

This one is truly different. It holds that an amorphous group of right wing nuts has devised an intricate scheme to dupe the mainstream press into running fallacious stories about Bill and Hillary being involved in crooked activities. And it comes directly from the Clinton administration, nicely packaged in a 331-page document assembled by the White House and entitled, of all things, "Communications Stream of Conspiracy Commerce."

According to this theory, a group of "well-funded right-wing think tanks and individuals" underwrite conservative newsletters and newspapers, such as *The American Spectator*, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, and the Western Journalism Center. These publications fabricate "fringe" stories that are picked up by the cybernerds on the web.

British "tabloids," such as the London *Sunday Telegraph*, are quick to pick up these stories from the internet. Sometimes the American "right-of-center mainstream media," which includes the *Washington Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, do also. But they, the theory seems to hold, are often too stupid to surf the net effectively. So they wait until the Brits have done it, and only then do they get the story.

In any case, only after the American "right-of-center mainstream media" publish these stories do the congressional committees, which are apparently even more dimwitted than the right wing media types, become aware of them. These committees then announce plans to investigate. This

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trips the signal wires of the mainstream news-hounds like the *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, and voila, the fallacious stories become "news."

Most of the press treated the unveiling of this new White House conspiracy theory with good-natured derision. Their reaction reminded me of kids at a small college on the day that the campus humor magazine comes out, and everyone rushes to see what is said about them and their friends, and poke fun at each other over it.

Personally, I would have loved to have been in the London offices of the *Sunday Telegraph* when they heard that the White House had publicly called their newspaper a "tabloid." The *Telegraph* is, after all, one of England's most highly respected newspapers. It is run by a classy crowd of Brits, whose reaction to their pedigree being questioned by the likes of the Arkansas Clintons would have been something to behold.

For the most part, this new conspiracy theory is simply nonsense, as anyone with even a casual knowledge of how the press works must surely know. But like all good goofy conspiracy theories, it contains some grains of truth.

It is definitely true, for example, that the *American Spectator* and the *Tribune-Review* are way out ahead of most of the rest of the pack in reporting on White House scandals. It is simply not true however that they fabricate their stories. They both have excellent, well-credentialed investigative reporters working for them, who, time and time again, have been proven correct by events or by the release of previously undisclosed documents.

Common sense would tell even the casual observer that if the stories these folks have run over the past several years were completely false, there wouldn't be so many special prosecutors looking into them, since the test to name one of these prosecutors requires a considerable amount of advanced evidence.

The whole thing reminds me of a story told by Napoleon's friend Bourrienne about the Corsican's reaction when a group of soldiers announced one evening that after much discussion they had proved, by all manner of logic, that there was no God. Looking up to the stars that filled the sky over the Egyptian desert, Napoleon answered, "Very ingenious, Messieurs: but who made all that?"

It is also not true that the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Washington Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* pick up these stories from the internet. All three of these newspapers also have excellent investigative reporters working the beat on their own. In fact, the *Telegraph* employs Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, who is, in my opinion, one of the finest, and I must add, most courageous, investigative reporters working today.

In the case of the *Journal*, only the editorial page covers White House scandals in any depth anyway. The news section openly shies away from printing anything that might upset the White House, and when it has to do so, it almost always places the story in the legal pages in the "B section" of the paper.

There is little question that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are, as the White House theory indicates, far behind the curve on reporting "Whitewater" events. There is no evidence, however, that this is because they are desperately trying to keep from being duped into running erroneous stories by a group of nefarious, right-wing conspirators.

In fact, a growing body of evidence indicates that these newspapers approach the subject with great timidity as a result of a well orchestrated plan of intimidation by the White House, which works best against news organizations that are predisposed by their left-wing views, friendship with the Clintons, and their financial interests, to go easy on the administration anyway.

Two recent pieces, one in the December 16 issue of *The New Republic* by William Powers, and the other in the January 6 *Wall Street Journal* by Micah Morrison, provide considerable insight into this process.

According to both reporters, current and former members of the Clinton White House, including Mark Fabiani, Mark Gearan, Harold Ickes, Bruce Lindsey, and George Stephanopoulos, have waged an extensive "squelching campaign" directed at those media outlets, both newspapers and TV networks, that run pieces critical of the President's ethical failings.

One result has been that several high profile journalists have left their positions in the past few years because their paper or network bowed to White House pressure and refused to air their stories about Clinton-related scandals.

- o Douglas Frantz of the *Los Angeles Times* left the paper in 1993 after it refused to run his story about the "Troopergate" affair.

- o Jim Wooten left ABC's "scandal" beat (and was transferred to their London bureau) after a 1994 incident in which his story on "Troopergate" was axed. According to Powers, the story was killed by then-'World News Tonight' Executive Producer Rick Kaplan, who is a close friend of the President's.

- o Michael Isikoff left the *Washington Post* in protest over the paper's handling of his stories on Paula Corbin Jones.

- o Richard Behar left *Time Magazine* and moved to *Fortune* after he got into a "tussle" with Tyson foods over a story he had written about alleged cash payments made by Tyson to then-Governor Clinton. This is a fairly unique example, in that despite the pressure exerted by Tyson, *Time*, in the end, stood behind the story.

- o Chris Ruddy was "let go" by *The New York Post*, and now is employed by the above-mentioned *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, because of his investigative efforts on the Vince Foster case.

According to Morrison and Powers, the White House has also attempted to turn reporters on each other.

o Susan Schmidt, described as a highly respected writer for the *Washington Post*, has been, they say, the target of regular White House-inspired contentions of "shoddy" reporting.

o Jeff Gerth and Stephen Labaton, who cover the Whitewater beat for *The New York Times*, have been the brunt of repeated personal attacks sponsored by the White House for years.

Both Powers and Morrison contend that in addition to compelling some journalists to leave their positions and damaging the reputations of others, the White House has several other victories to its credit.

o Morrison states that in 1994, when ABC was planning to run a story on Clinton's alleged use of state troopers to procure women, his private attorney, David Kendall, flew to New York to "lobby against the piece." Rather than investigate the allegations made by Arkansas State Trooper L.D. Brown, Kendall suggested to ABC that their time might be more effectively used if they were to investigate allegations that Brown murdered his own mother. He writes, "The ugly allegation was false, but the ABC story [on Troopergate] never ran."

o Both Morrison and Powers recount the intense lobbying effort waged by Clinton aides to keep former FBI agent Gary Aldrich, whose book contains some scathing allegations against the Clinton's, from appearing on the network interview shows. Although the White House was unsuccessful in keeping Aldrich from appearing on "This Week with David Brinkley," both NBC's "Dateline" and CNN's "Larry King Live" were persuaded to cancel their scheduled interviews with Aldrich, prompting George Stephanopoulos to "boast" "we killed it."

Threats, both veiled and unveiled, have also allegedly been leveled against journalists who have crossed the White House, according to Powers and Morrison.

o In January of last year, Morrison reports, ABC's Jackie Judd and Chris Vlasto "were working on a piece about the political nature of Sen. Alfonse D'Amato's Whitewater Committee." Although the White House "instantaneously produced a D'Amato packet" complete with an "Ethics Sampler" detailing ethical allegations against the Senator, Presidential advisors became agitated when the derogatory information was attributed, on air, to the White House. According to Morrison, White House Spokesman Mike Mcurry made an angry phone call to Mr. Vlasto and screamed "You're never going to work in this town again!"

Vlasto still works for ABC, but other reporters have not managed to stand up so well to White House threats. Morrison reports that *New York Daily News* reporter David Einstadt was fired after he wrote a story linking top Clinton fund raiser Terry McAuliffe to the now-infamous John Huang. Morrison reports that, according to "James Ledbetter of the *Village Voice* . . . Einstadt was fired 'after the Clinton campaign reportedly complained to *News* co-publisher Mort Zuckerman,' a frequent White House guest."

Needless to say, the examples cited by both Morrison and Powers are both numerous and compelling. Indeed, Morrison cites ABC's Jackie Judd as saying, "The White House views this [the battle over reporting of scandals] as a war, and they're going to use whatever they can to win it."

In short, if there is a clandestine plot afoot to influence the public's perception of Clinton-related scandals, there is at least as much evidence to indicate that the administration is not the victim, but the aggressor.

In one sense none of this is important, since Ken Starr will have the final word anyway. If he brings credible indictments against a host of administration officials, the White House press conspiracy theory will have a short lifespan. If he doesn't, it is doubtful that the mainstream media will pursue the story any further, no matter what the "right wing" press reports.

In another sense, however, the controversy involves, I believe, one of the most important public policy discussions imaginable. That is, whether the press is any longer capable of fulfilling its role as a watchdog against corruption in government.

As I have said numerous times in these pages, including last week's issue, I believe that the forces of corruption are more powerful and well financed today than they have ever been. As such, I believe they are a very real threat to the future of American society and to the integrity of the financial markets.

Besides having a president of great integrity, one of the most important defenses against this threat is a strong, vigilant free press. I said this in a piece last March entitled "Honesty Matters More Now Than Ever." In light of the new White House conspiracy theory, implying that the mainstream media is irresponsible, I believe this thought is worth repeating.

"History records that America's founding fathers were extremely mindful of the importance of the watchdog roll of a free press. This was a common notion among Englishman of the day, dating at least as far back as 1644 when Milton wrote the remarkable *Areopagitica*, which was delivered in support of freedom of the press before the famous Long Parliament, during the early days of the English civil war. Milton's plea to the Presbyterian majority was for the revocation of the order requiring the licensing of printing in England. It went as follows:

'And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter.'

Tocqueville also commented favorably several times on the importance of the roll of the press in keeping politicians honest, most directly when he said, 'It's [the press'] eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion.'"

The White House, of course, contends that the mainstream press is abusing its watchdog role. If this is true it is a grievous fault. As I indicated earlier, I think the mainstream press is neglecting its watchdog role. If I am correct, the nation will grievously pay for it.

The White House thinks the mainstream press is acting improperly because of stupidity. I think it is acting improperly for two other reasons, although I wouldn't quarrel with the contention that

these folks aren't rocket scientists. I presented these reasons in the previously mentioned March piece, as follows.

"A common explanation for this [the fact that there are virtually no good investigative journalists doing any significant national work in the mainstream media] is that the mainstream media is dominated by a liberal perspective, and is therefore averse to looking too deeply into the foibles of a Democratic president. There is probably some truth to this, but if so, all it does is support my thesis that honesty in high places is of increased importance today because the watchdog roll of the mainstream press can no longer be trusted.

In any case, I think there is at least one other reason why the mainstream media is less than enthusiastic about continuing this traditional roll. This is because the very nature of the media has changed substantially in the past few decades, as a result of the growing influence of non-print information sources and the ownership of many of the nation's major news organizations by giant conglomerates.

The primary interest of these giant news and information networks is to make money, not to expose corruption in the interests of the "public good." Indeed, such a venture could be damaging since all of these organizations have huge financial interests around the globe, which could be put at risk if their "news" rises very far above the level of "bland."

A comprehensive rundown of media ownership in America is probably not necessary here to document this point. But it is instructive to note that Rupert Murdoch, who owns the Fox Television Network and News Corp. (which enjoys a big investment by MCI Communications), is working on a deal with Tele-Communications Inc. (the nation's number one cable firm, which also has a deal going with Sprint and owns part of Turner Broadcasting) to form a worldwide sports channel, to challenge ESPN, which is owned by Disney, which also owns ABC.

Turner's operation is, of course, being bought by Time-Warner, which owns the Book-of-the-Month Club. US West owns a piece of Time-Warner, but a larger piece is owned by Seagram, which owns the majority of MCA, Inc., the giant book, record and movie producer, which is partly owned by Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. Westinghouse owns CBS, of course. And General Electric owns NBC, which is teaming up with Microsoft to form a new cable news channel hooked into some sort of on-line service. Simon & Schuster and MTV are owned by Viacom, a chunk of which is owned by Nynex.

One result of this trend was stated succinctly recently by Andrew Blau, director of the communications policy project at the Benton Foundation, a Washington based think-tank: "Rather than dictating what you should think, media consortia are really being organized to influence what you should think about (emphasis in the original)."

Another result is to make these "news" organizations exceedingly skittish about how the White House views them, given such considerations as FCC licensing and anti-trust concerns.

Another result is that the White House can apparently ridicule their reporters and their news acumen in public without feeling any fear that they will turn on them.

As I said earlier, this is a frightening prospect, and may be the most important piece of bad "news" to come out of the flap over the new White House "conspiracy theory." The good news that came out of the flap is that the conservative press has apparently developed enough credibility, at least at the White House, to command the title of "right of center mainstream media" by the White House. Right of center mainstream? As the old Germans in Iowa would say, "That is me something!"

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