

Richard Nixon's Revenge

The hired hands CBS picked to investigate its "60 Minutes" debacle may deny it till the cows come home. But liberal bias ruined the career of Dan Rather—and CBS News.

The CBS of Walter Cronkite's salad days is gone. And the beginning of the fall of network news can be traced to that era, right down to the day and month.

After his address to the nation on Nov. 3, 1969 that called on the "silent majority" to stand by him for peace with honor in Vietnam was savaged by network anchors and commentators, an infuriated Richard Nixon ordered his staff to respond.

Vice President Agnew was sent to launch the counterstrike. On Nov. 13, in a speech in Des Moines that Teddy White called one of the most masterful forensic discourses in U.S. history, Agnew tore into media liberal bias and demanded to know why a tiny handful of men, elected by no one, were deciding the news for the American people.

Broadcast on all three networks, the speech was a sensation. Tens of thousands of telegrams poured into the networks and their affiliates, applauding what Agnew said. By Monday, *Newsweek* and *Time* had the network anchors on their covers. The issue of liberal bias cohabiting with immense media power was on the table. It never came off.

A week later, Agnew launched the second strike on the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The White House was now in a mortal struggle with the self-styled "adversary press."

Teddy White retells the story of that five-year battle in his *Making of the President, 1972*. In that year, as White reported, Nixon triumphed over the media. But in 1974, he was broken by Watergate. As he said in exile, "I gave

them a sword and they ran it right through me."

By 1975, the liberal media establishment could claim to have played a central role in bringing down a president and ending—or losing, depending on your point of view—a war. But the secondary explosions from Agnew's attacks had impacted.

What he had done was to strip the false flag of neutrality from Big Media and expose it as a co-belligerent in the political wars, no longer entitled to any immunity from attack. Reed Irvine's *Accuracy in Media* came into being to monitor the liberal press.

Then, beginning with the *New York Times*, newspapers yielded to the attacks on their fairness by creating op-ed pages and adding conservative columnists to prove to readers they were unbiased. The networks began running Left-Right debates.

Then came the talk shows. "Agronsky & Co." in Washington had tilted left. The new "McLaughlin Group," with this writer and Robert Novak joining Jack Germond and Mort Kondracke, tilted right.

In 1981, the *Washington Post's* dominance of the capital was broken by the *Washington Times*. Republicans and conservatives now saw their concerns raised in the Beltway press and could read a dozen columnists who shared their convictions and opinions.

Then, suddenly, Ted Turner's all-news cable channel was on the air. While CNN did not live up to its billing as an alternative to the Big Three liberal networks, its all-day format insured the Right would

get a hearing, "Crossfire," first of the national Left-Right daily interview-debate shows, was launched.

In the 1970s and the Reaganite 1980s, many AM stations went news-talk. Conservative commentators became popular, then dominant. In the 1990s, Rush Limbaugh exploded onto the national airwaves. Today, there are dozens of nationally syndicated radio talk shows and scores of well-known local radio commentators. Almost all are conservative, populist, or libertarian.

The 1990s saw the breaking of CNN's monopoly of cable news with the birth of MSNBC and Roger Ailes's FOX News, which is as receptive to conservatives as Howell Raines's *New York Times* was to liberals.

At the same time, the Internet came into its own. Now, millions of Americans have favorite websites and blogs they read before even picking up the morning paper or tuning in to Katie Couric.

All the while this was happening, the audience for network news was shrinking, and the steady barrage of criticism of its liberal bias from cable and conservative critics and columnists of the Right was continuing.

In September, Dan Rather, using fabricated and forged memos, fired a head shot at the president of the United States. The gun blew up in his face. The rest is history. At CBS, they know today that their power is disappearing, their audience is departing, and their credibility is shot. Conservative perseverance exposed the liberal bias, and technology killed the monopoly.

Somewhere Richard Nixon is smiling. Somewhere Spiro Agnew is laughing. I will not ask Dan Rather where they are—as he and CBS are just not "fair and balanced" on this question. ■

Hunger for Dictatorship

War to export democracy may wreck our own.

By Scott McConnell

STUDENTS OF HISTORY inevitably think in terms of periods: the New Deal, McCarthyism, “the Sixties” (1964-1973), the NEP, the purge trials—all have their dates. Weimar, whose cultural excesses made effective propaganda for the Nazis, now seems like the antechamber to Nazism, though surely no Weimar figures perceived their time that way as they were living it. We may pretend to know what lies ahead, feigning certainty to score polemical points, but we never do.

Nonetheless, there are foreshadowings well worth noting. The last weeks of 2004 saw several explicit warnings from the antiwar Right about the coming of an American fascism. Paul Craig Roberts in these pages wrote of the “brownshirting” of American conservatism—a word that might not have surprised had it come from Michael Moore or Michael Lerner. But from a Hoover Institution senior fellow, former assistant secretary of the Treasury in the Reagan administration, and one-time *Wall Street Journal* editor, it was striking.

Several weeks later, Justin Raimondo, editor of the popular *Antiwar.com* website, wrote a column headlined, “Today’s Conservatives are Fascists.” Pointing to the justification of torture by conservative legal theorists, widespread support for a militaristic foreign policy, and a retrospective backing of Japanese internment during World War II, Raimondo raised the prospect of “fascism with a democratic face.” His fellow libertarian, Mises Institute president Lew Rockwell, wrote a year-end piece called “The Reality of Red State Fascism,” which

claimed that “the most significant sociopolitical shift in our time has gone almost completely unremarked, and even unnoticed. It is the dramatic shift of the red-state bourgeoisie from leave-us-alone libertarianism, manifested in the Congressional elections of 1994, to almost totalitarian statist nationalism. Whereas the conservative middle class once cheered the circumscribing of the federal government, it now celebrates power and adores the central state, particularly its military wing.”

I would argue that Rockwell—who makes the most systematic argument of the three—overstates the libertarian component of the 1994 Republican victory, which could just as readily be credited to heartland rejection of the ’60s cultural liberalism that came into office with the Clintons. And it is difficult to imagine any scenario, after 9/11, that would not lead to some expansion of federal power. The United States was suddenly at war, mobilizing to strike at a Taliban government on the other side of the world. The emergence of terrorism as the central security issue had to lead, at the very least, to increased domestic surveillance—of Muslim immigrants especially. War is the health of the state, as the libertarians helpfully remind us, but it doesn’t mean that war leads to fascism.

But Rockwell (and Roberts and Raimondo) is correct in drawing attention to a mood among some conservatives that is at least latently fascist. Rockwell describes a populist Right website that originally rallied for the impeachment of Bill Clinton as “hate-filled ... advocating

nuclear holocaust and mass bloodshed for more than a year now.” One of the biggest right-wing talk-radio hosts regularly calls for the mass destruction of Arab cities. Letters that come to this magazine from the pro-war Right leave no doubt that their writers would welcome the jailing of dissidents. And of course it’s not just us. When *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth wrote a column suggesting that American troops be brought home sooner rather than later, he was blown away by letters comparing him to Tokyo Rose and demanding that he be tried as a traitor. That mood, Rockwell notes, dwarfs anything that existed during the Cold War. “It celebrates the shedding of blood, and exhibits a maniacal love of the state. The new ideology of the red-state bourgeoisie seems to actually believe that the US is God marching on earth—not just godlike, but really serving as a proxy for God himself.”

The warnings from these three writers would have been significant even if they had not been complemented by what for me was the most striking straw in the wind. Earlier this month the *New York Times* published a profile of Fritz Stern, the now retired but still very active professor of history at Columbia University and one of my first and most significant mentors. I met Stern as an undergraduate in the spring of 1974. His lecture course on 20th-century Europe combined intellectual lucidity and passion in a way I had never imagined possible. It led me to graduate school, and if I later became diverted from academia