

Clueless

WHY THE ELITE MEDIA DON'T UNDERSTAND AMERICA

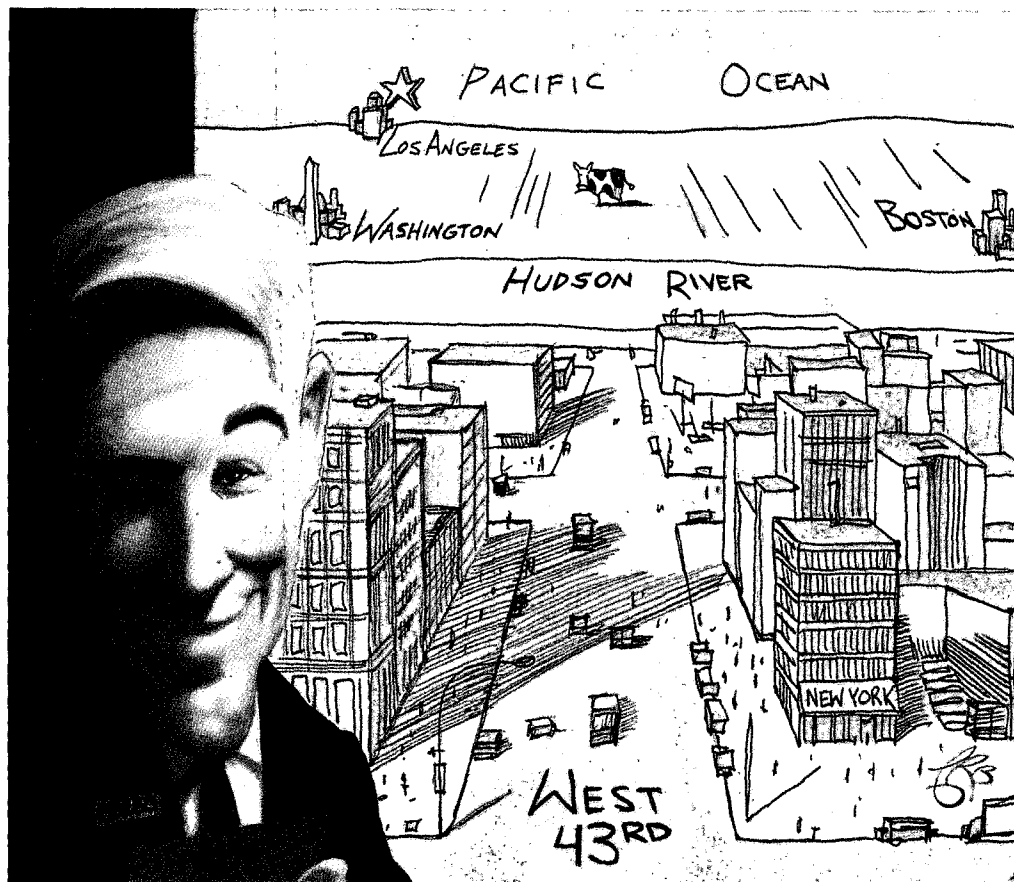


Illustration by James Bennett

BY
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Over the past 30 years, America's population and economy have shifted decisively away from the Northeast, as powerful new economic and cultural centers have emerged in the West and South. Yet as businesses and people have fled from the nation's birthplace, the media have chosen to return to their Manhattan womb. ¶ In the last century, New York editors like Horace Greeley urged Americans westward, and millions took their advice, changing forever the nation's regional balance. The movement continues: Since 1970, population has soared 50 percent in the South and 71 percent in the West, but just 5 percent in the once-dominant Northeast. Economic trends have followed the same pattern: Over the last two decades, Eastern job growth has stumbled along at one-third below the national average.

By contrast, the media's re-concentration in New York reflects its increasing divorce from the rest of the nation. Studies by Stanley Rothman of Smith College, who has exhaustively researched America's news and entertainment businesses, show New York's media leaders to be among the least religious and most liberal of the country's elite, even compared to government bureaucrats, trial lawyers, judges, and Hollywood. "There are only three actual voting precincts in the whole country that are statistically as left-wing as America's newsrooms," notes Michael Barone, co-author of the *Almanac of American Politics*.

Yet the media's leftward bent often obscures an even more compelling fact: its physical concentration in a single New York borough that is one of the least representative places in modern America. All four national news networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox—are headquartered within walking distance of each other. The nation's two most dominant papers, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, are published within a subway ride of opinion-shaping magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, and *Fortune*.

More than liberal bias, this conglomeration of media power increasingly reflects a retrograde Northeastern elitism out of sync with the rest of the country. In response, more and more Americans are tuning out the messages. The establishment media continue to influence one group heavily, however—and that is other elites throughout the country.

Ironically, just two decades ago, the media business resembled what America would later become: highly diverse, dynamic, and profoundly democratic. Newsrooms were filled with up-from-the-ranks veterans, talented college dropouts, and hard-drinking misfits. Local papers were particularly representative in their staffing, and in the days before national newspapers, all-news TV networks, and the Internet, the local press often offered a contrarian perspective to Northeastern establishment wisdom.

More recently, the news media have come to resemble a modern-day caste, largely dominated by a relative handful of individuals sharing a common background and, in most cases, common real estate. There may be more women and minorities in newsrooms today, but in their class and education, Rothman's research shows, the media have become ever more rarified. "Much of [today's] media elite went to Ivy League schools and come from wealthy backgrounds," observes Rothman. "Old-fashioned newspaper people were fading out as early as the 1970s, and they are now basically all gone."

Rothman's research shows that in the 1970s, top editors and reporters in New York and Washington were less likely than other elites—particularly business leaders, high-level bureaucrats, or elite lawyers—to have attended Ivy League colleges or been born into privileged families. By 1995, however, media honchos formed one of the most educationally and socially privileged groups in America, with a higher proportion of Ivy League graduates than any other group except the top lawyers.

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In contrast, the media's West Coast cousin, Hollywood, has never quite substituted caste-like succession for an up-from-the-ranks culture. Less than 18 percent of Hollywood's elite come from parents with graduate school educations, versus nearly 30 percent for the media caste. This helps explain Rothman's surprising finding that while Hollywood is as socially liberal as the print and broadcast media, it is far more conservative on economic issues: TV and movie executives, products of a hotly competitive business world, still tend to earn—not matriculate—their way to success.

Several factors unique to the news media explain why Northeastern elites have stymied the democratization and geographical dispersion that have occurred in other U.S. institutions. Even closely related sectors like the entertainment industry have become far more widely spread in communities like Nashville, the Bay Area, or New Orleans. Independent production companies, new record labels, even new studios have regularly undone efforts to concentrate control.

Television, radio, and newspapers, however, are far more routinized, predictable, ad-driven businesses than entertainment. They now attract big financial interests that relentlessly consolidate players into major networks and regional affiliates, while raising the costs of entry for new firms. Heavy government regulation of the broadcast spectrum has definitely helped the industry fight off entrepreneurial challenges and preserve its caste privileges.

These trends were profoundly reinforced by the rise of elite journalism schools, which rapidly became breeding grounds for an approved media consciousness. Although many media professionals profess to view such programs with suspicion—the *New Republic* savaged Columbia's school of journalism in 1993—nonetheless an elite college credential is now the sesame to top jobs in print, television, and other news sectors. As one student confessed, "There is an amazing Ivy League door-opening thing that goes on when you mention Columbia."

Other big industries have begun to emphasize credentials too, but as smaller firms, many located in the nation's "hinterlands," have displaced larger businesses in many sectors of our economy, they have moderated this obsession. Throughout the country—from Houston oil firms to Nashville's music industry—verve, aggression, and natural talent remain far more important than accidents of birth, breeding, or college ties.

Even a decade ago, upstarts like Ted Turner's Atlanta-based CNN, the Financial News Network in Los Angeles, and fledgling publishing empires in Miami (Knight Ridder), San Diego (Copley), and Virginia (Gannet) seemed to signal that the news media would join in the decentralizing trend. But this promise died stillborn, a victim of mergers and personal ambition.

Time Warner, the ultimate bastion of Manhattan elitism, subsumed CNN and seduced Turner (whose bid for CBS in league with financier Mike Milken had once sent shockwaves through the New York establishment) with charter membership in the Manhattan elite. The Financial News Network was swallowed up by CNBC, creating yet another New York perspective on fi-

nancial markets, the economy, and social trends. Regional networks never expanded to fill the void.

New York's media concentration was further hastened by the dramatic decline of Washington, D.C., once its greatest rival. A decade ago leading intellectuals like conservatives Irving and William Kristol flocked to the nation's capital, ground zero of a sharp ideological battle for the future of the country, if not the world.

But the end of the Cold War, the takeover of Congress by Republicans averse to Washington empire-building, and the election of an administration devoid of a purpose greater than fending off scandal have severely reduced Washington's importance. The Dow Jones average has replaced State Department and Pentagon briefings as the daily media touchstone.

Washington as a place to live also declined markedly under Marion Barry, becoming one of the most dangerous, unattractive urban areas in the country. As New York under Mayor Rudy Giuliani restrained crime and street-level paupery in areas frequented by the well-to-do, media elites shifted their emphasis, and often their residence, to Gotham.

"New York is the biggest beneficiary of Washington's fall," observes Fred Siegel, whose recent book, *The Future Once Happened Here* chronicles the history of New York, Washington, and Los Angeles. "What I see now is the resurgence of old-fashioned ego-centrism: I live here and it counts."

The strange concentration of book publishers, influential newspaper and magazine editors, and TV executives within a few square blocks of Manhattan would be little more than an oddity but for one fact: this parochialism leads the media caste to perpetuate many damaging myths about America's dispersed, ever-democratizing, ever-evolving society and economy. By rights, our national media should be reflecting and explaining the country in all of its far-flung economic, technological, and political hues. Yet with the notable exception of talk radio and a few journals, they do very poorly on this front.

Because the nation's media elite increasingly resemble an aristocracy, hailing from the same exclusive schools and privileged backgrounds, it's not surprising that surveys show key members share remarkably narrow common views on issues like the environment, abortion, and economics. "These guys are basically all from the same place. They all read the *New York Times*, and they talk to each other more than anyone else," Professor Rothman notes. And like any group, the media elite pursues its own self-interest—even if its leaders hotly deny it.

Thus the parochial perspectives of a few over-privileged Manhattanites are taking on a far greater importance in the national discourse than they deserve. And this is having an effect: According to Rothman's data, local elites *outside* the Northeast, including traditionally conservative groups like local heads of Chambers of Commerce or managers of large corporations, are beginning to shift towards New York elite opinion on critical social and economic issues. Many regional media outlets—typically run by individuals aspiring to New York caste membership—now slavishly propagate the high-brow Manhattan consensus.

All this has its lighter moments. As the national media mutates into the mouthpiece of elite New York culture, even the most minute elements of that city's privileged lifestyles—from Soho chic to Times Square's Disney-esque revival—are treated as matters of global importance. A significant portion of American decision makers now treat new restaurant openings and celebrity apartment purchases in midtown Manhattan as more telling economic indicators than the vastly more significant growth of the rest of America.

Indeed, now that conditions in Manhattan have visibly improved along the sidewalks they frequent, New York media elites are embarrassing themselves with an orgy of boosterism. *Time* and *Newsweek* recently published fawning multi-page stories celebrating New York's "resurgence." *Vanity Fair's* editors have anointed New York as the "champagne city." *Fortune* has gone so far as to claim that New York is now the "Best" U.S. City for Business.

One of your authors is a native New Yorker, and both of us welcome recent signs of improvement in the city, but it's wrong for the N.Y.-centric media to allow their parochial class interests to color their portrayals of national issues. As one senior *New York Times* editor concedes, the city's media elite has a vested interest in supporting its real estate and other regional investments. "We think part of our job is figuring out reasons why people should stay here," he told us. "I think we have a right to do that."

This agenda, however, profoundly distorts trends in the U.S. economy, because the influence of the *New York Times* and its Manhattan siblings extends far beyond Gotham City. If the *Arizona Republic* exaggerates Phoenix's glories, few people outside the Valley of the Sun care. But when the New York media fall in love with themselves (or treat other parts of the nation with the cold shoulder or old stereotypes, which is an even bigger problem), the unrepresentative make-up of our establishment media becomes a national dilemma.

Take *Fortune's* "analysis" of New York City as the nation's premier business location. To come to this astounding conclusion, the magazine's supposedly hardbitten, reflexively skeptical editors had to ignore mountains of disturbing evidence of economic dysfunction. The fact is, New York City continues to be hobbled by America's heaviest taxes, one of the nation's highest unemployment rates, job creation levels far below the national average, and the lowest proportion of its population in the labor force of any major city. In Cognetics, Inc.'s widely watched survey of fast-growing businesses, New York ranks forty-seventh out of fifty metropolitan regions, ahead of only Albany, Rochester, and Hartford—all in the economically-lagging Northeast.

It's even more unbelievable that *not one city* in Texas, Florida, or California—the three states that generate 70 percent of all new American jobs—made *Fortune's* top ten of best cities for business. "How can you talk about the 'best' economies in places that create half the number of new jobs we've created here?" asks Jim Kollaer, a business leader in Houston, one of America's most rapidly growing big cities. The answer is simple: Places like Houston, Salt Lake City, and Phoenix, are simply not

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fashionable—indeed are often looked down upon—by reporters cocooned in the Northeast.

Another example of the reality-warping effects of the media elite's parochialism is the abortive campaign of the New York media to proclaim their city a powerhouse in the important new industry of multimedia. The city has been dubbed "Silicon Alley" and the nation's "cyber-capital" by various publications—largely on the back of anecdotes concocted by local real estate opportunists. "Our strategy was to take an empty building and make it digital" (wire it with outlets), confesses John Gilbert, chief operating officer for the Rudin Group, one the New York's largest and most aggressive real estate firms. "There's always attention focused on New York, and there's all the media here to get." With their interest in portraying their hometown as a progressive economic leader, the establishment media based in New York have uncritically swallowed many absurd claims.

Anyone familiar with high-tech development knows that New York's cyber-sector is actually smaller, according to objective studies, than competitors in San Francisco and Los Angeles. "'Silicon Alley' seems to have been a great marketing notion...but economically it's not much," admits Steve Lohr, who covered multimedia for the *New York Times* before finding that the reality increasingly diverged from the hype. "Name the major stand-alone multimedia companies that have emerged from New York. Do any exist?"

Class and regional identities within the elite media are strong enough to trump even ideological divisions. The recent lionization of New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, for example, is partly a product of New York-based conservatives effusing in outlets like the *Weekly Standard*. Strangely, many of the same conservatives who sneer at figures like Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan or New Jersey governor Christie Whitman as liberal apostates are enthusiastic Giuliani boosters. This is telling, given Giuliani's aggressive support for measures like rent control, massive corporate subsidies, gay rights, and racial preferences, not to mention his endorsements of liberal Democrats over more conservative Republican opponents. (Giuliani campaigned for Mario Cuomo against George Pataki, and Bill Clinton against Bob Dole.)

The media caste's true ideology arises from its peculiar class interests, and the unprecedented comfort it enjoys in a Northeastern Corridor that is still profoundly anti-business, anti-growth, and anti-working-class. Simply because conditions have improved noticeably for upper-income earners in Manhattan, Bethesda, and Cambridge, the media's liberal elites have decided to ignore the unbalanced economies that now creak along in their cultural strongholds.

In New York City, for instance, many neighborhoods remain in terrible shape. Just-released Census Bureau figures covering the first three years of the '90s show that in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, median household income actually *fell* (in the case of the

Bronx, to a level fully \$10,000 below the national median). Even in Manhattan, the borough-wide median income dipped by \$300—over a period when the *national* median was *climbing* \$1,185.

There is good reason to distrust the picture of our nation projected by today's media caste. This is partly because the economic view of today's elite media is heavily driven by "post-industrial" fantasies that hype non-manufacturing industries, the importance of white-collar jobs, and the primacy of symbolic ethnic or gender goals over grubby increases in business productivity.

New York City is *the* post-industrial capital of America—a place with an overall static economy and a manufacturing base that fell from 610,000 jobs in 1980 to just 250,000 today (barely a fraction of what exists in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, or Houston today). Those trends are coupled with the presence of America's most militant public employee unions and a massive welfare bureaucracy. But rather than being exemplary models for the rest of the nation, as the media often seem to believe, these economic lessons do not easily apply to the world inhabited by most Americans, perhaps even most New Yorkers.

Unfortunately, some cities and regions have decided to cater to the media's prevailing economic nostrums in order to win favorable coverage that might help them lure national attention and capital away from more deserving regions. Because so many reporters are now office-bound in Northeastern glass towers, savvy consultants and quote-meisters pushing the right buttons can easily hoodwink them. For example: By touting a handful of clean, campus-like developments that appealed to the sensibilities of Ivy-trained journalists, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, has emerged as the preferred model of academic-led, high-tech development. "There's a kind of elitism here that attracts reporters. It's different than trying to sell them Charlotte or Houston," notes Bob Goodale, deputy secretary of North Carolina's Department of Commerce. "In a place like this they never get shown the warts, and they'll never know the difference."

Raleigh-Durham has done all right for itself, fostering a total of some 60,000 high-tech jobs by 1995 estimates. But that is less than exist in places like Philadelphia or Orange County, California, and is less than *half* the number of high tech jobs in Dallas. So why the media bubble? Those other areas may be too business-oriented, too rough-edged, perhaps too politically conservative in culture to attract reporters who prefer liberal college towns like Raleigh, or Madison, Wisconsin, or Austin, Texas, as their American exemplars.

"A lot of people want to go do chi-chi stories about Austin," observes Cognetics president David Birch. "But Dallas is so much bigger. It's a behemoth that you never hear about it." Disfavored regions like Dallas have grown despite elite media indifference. But how much more productive would America now be if the media had accurately reported to the citizenry who the nation's industrial stars (and industrial stinkers) really are?

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Addiction to the post-industrial fantasy also explains the almost pathological fascination media elites display for environmentalism. Like the British gentry, who justified their nation's consolidation of property into just a few hands as a form of "conservation," there is an ugly exclusionary tinge to the media's support today for even the most outlandish environmentalist efforts.

De-industrialized Manhattan risks few job losses from draconian pollution standards. And unlike Western states that may have half of their acreage in federal hands, the city has little to fear from giving state or federal regulators greater control over land they oversee. New York barely understands the difficult environmental-versus-economic choices that other parts of the country face, simply because it has relatively little development, growth, or fresh expansion to be reconciled with. Over the past year, the entire Northeast built barely one-tenth the new industrial space constructed in regions such as the Southeast, the Intermountain West, the Pacific Northwest, and the Southwest.

These realities explain why, despite a treaty unconscionably skewed against the U.S. (and opposed by virtually all manufacturers and private-sector unions), the mainstream media reverently touted the benefits of the recent global warming "protocol" in Kyoto. The jobs of Manhattan and Washington journalists simply weren't at stake. Many of those few still left in Brooklyn, not to mention hundreds of thousands in heavily industrialized California, Illinois, or Arizona, are however.

Similarly, the flood of editorials in the establishment media last summer in favor of the Clinton administration's regressive new air quality standards were inspired in considerable measure by an unusually smoggy year in Maine and Martha's Vineyard. Shutting down midwestern powerplants and factories counts for little if that's what it takes to keep elite, private valhallas pristine.

The media further confuses economic reality by crudely equating the interests of Wall Street with the interests of Main Street. In truth, only 7,000 of America's more than 6 million businesses of record are traded on public exchanges. Wall Street does well when companies cut jobs and create "balance-sheet" profits. Main Street prospers more when local jobs and sales expand.

New York reporters haven't noticed that even on Wall Street itself, prosperity is something more complicated than just the Dow Jones average. Finance now produces a greater share of New York's total city income than a decade ago, but the number of jobs in the finance industry is actually less than in the 1980s. So even as Wall Street booms, a relatively narrow group of workers is benefiting. Recent studies show that income disparities between the wealthiest and poorest fifths of New York's population are worse than anywhere else in America. Even more telling, the gap between the city's *middle class* and its most affluent denizens is also the widest in the nation. But don't count on reporters enjoying all the new pasta houses in the financial district to understand this.

The media's social milieu differs from Middle America at least as much as their economic milieu does. Compared to Main

Street, media types marry less, divorce more, are oftener childless, are mostly unchurched, and frequently lack familiarity with normal American suburban life. One result of all this is that our major press regularly misses, ignores, or scoffs at important trends sweeping the heartland of the nation. Over the last two decades, this has happened with scores of big stories.

For instance, our major media didn't spot the religious renewal now underway in America until long after it had taken off. They were completely surprised by the recent flipover to a Republican Congress—a flummoxed Peter Jennings, remember, called the '94 vote a "temper tantrum." In 1992, the establishment political press had no idea Pat Buchanan could win 40 percent of the New Hampshire primary vote against a sitting President—because New Hampshire isn't media elite habitat. (Vermont is more to their taste.)

Earlier, Ronald Reagan's 1980 election stunned most of our media elite, and his continuing popularity with the public throughout the '80s left them mystified. The N.Y./D.C. media were also blindsided by developments like the rejection by many American women, over the last decade, of feminism as a term of self-description. (Many still don't realize it has happened.) Other cultural realities in "flyover country"—like the peculiar American attachment to guns, the popular appeal of someone like Dr. Laura Schlessinger, the revolt against liberalism by white males—have likewise bewildered our provincial media elite.

What should the rest of the country, from the Grand Ole Opry to Grand Rapids, do about all this? One strategy is to simply tune out. "The conservative half of the country ignores the national media," Michael Barone maintains. "Their ratings in the hinterlands are horrible." This strategy soothes the frayed sensitivities of those driven crazy by the media's regional, class, and ideological biases. It does little, however, to balance the message received by the other, largely urban, heavily politicized half of America.

A better response might be to reignite the decentralization trends that earlier birthed CNN, FNN, and influential regional print media. More publications need to cover, *and be based in*, locations that are currently ignored or crudely stereotyped by the national press. If average Americans begin to understand the nature and narrowness of today's dominant media caste—and their ability to twist our perceptions of reality—they will search out alternatives for their own good. People in Denver, Indianapolis, Nashville, and other parts of this broad, varied, and prosperous nation must realize that if they define their lives and their civilization based on what the establishment media tell them is true, they are endangering their prosperity and their birthrights.

Maybe then a few entrepreneurs (ideally, aided by an opening of the airwaves from Washington's regulators) will see the nation's need for alternative means of news reporting. And the sooner a challenge is offered to America's domination by today's smug and short-sighted media caste, the better.





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NASHVILLE



RIDES A WAVE

AND WONDERS WHERE IT'S HEADING

By Philip Langdon

To people not attracted to its music, Nashville has long seemed a cultural curiosity—a source of lachrymose songs delivered by men decked out in cowboy hats and women with a taste for elaborate hairdos. ■ Country music is the defining image of Nashville. But the real Nashville, as opposed to the entertainment-driven stereotype, is much more complex, and intriguing. On the rolling land along the broad-looping Cumberland River is a rising, remarkably hopeful metropolis, one whose growth consistently outpaces the nation's. Nashville is booming. And as it booms, it is coming face to face with all the issues that confront American cities at their most dynamic.