



BITTER OVER VINOCUR

by Fred Barnes

Conservatives who regard the *New York Times* as dangerously and unshakably liberal should, for the sake of balance and fairness, consider a recent attack on John Vinocur, the paper's correspondent in West Germany. The fusillade came in the June 6 issue of the *Village Voice*, the trendy, leftist weekly, and was written by Alexander Cockburn, known to many for his stylishly written but painfully predictable columns in the *Wall Street Journal*. Social Democrats will be relieved by Vinocur's transfer to France, Cockburn said, quoting one as contending "that three-quarters of the tensions between Bonn and Washington had been caused by Vinocur's reports."

And that's only for starters, according to Cockburn. "Over recent years Vinocur has kept up a steady flow of dispatches, platitudinous, stereotypical, crammed with innuendoes, racist in general about Germans and Scandinavians, and especially hostile to the German Social Democrats, the peace movement and the Swedish socialists," Cockburn wrote. "Sometimes the speed of his reactions is highly comical, though sinister in intent. Scarcely had Kennan, McNamara, et al. testified in favor of a U.S. 'no first use' commitment on nuclear weapons before Vinocur hastily mustered a couple of West Germans to say this would be a lousy idea and highly detrimental to Western security." In short, Vinocur mixes "journalistic adroitness and ideological conservatism."

Hmmm. Ideological conservatism at the *New York Times*? To find if this beast had indeed slouched into the *Times* through the wily writing of Vinocur, I perused his stories during the ten days in June that President Reagan was in Europe. What was there, not surprisingly, was something different from full-blooded conservatism. Rather, it was old-fashioned skepticism, that habit of mind that reporters are supposed to follow in judging events and listening

to the words of the mighty. And the problem for Cockburn, I suspect, is that Vinocur is skeptical about some of his sacred cows, including what Vinocur has characterized as "groups that call themselves the peace movement" and "people describing themselves as environmentalists."

Take the demonstration in Bonn on June 10, the day that Reagan and other leaders of NATO countries conferred in that city. Vinocur suggested that the crowd of several hundred thousand evinced "a summer-in-the-fun feeling" that contrasted with the severe anti-Reagan, anti-NATO rhetoric of the rally's organizers, one of which, he noted, was the West German Communist Party. "Without exception, the speeches were concerned with United States and NATO armament programs," he wrote. "Soviet missiles aimed at Western Europe were not described as threats by either of two retired generals, Gert Bastian of West Germany and M.H. von Meyenfeldt of the Netherlands, who talked to the crowd. Rather, the Soviet Union was praised for its offer of a deployment moratorium, an offer that, NATO

says, would only freeze its superiority in some areas." Another speaker, Vinocur wrote, was "a member of the World Peace Council, which has been described as a Soviet-front organization."

The day before the NATO session, Vinocur offered a "news analysis" on the "active and extremely emotional" opposition to Reagan in West Germany, an opposition that Chancellor Helmut Schmidt "has played an important role" shaping. "Personal distaste for Mr. Reagan is often expressed in terms of revulsion," Vinocur wrote. One reason for the strong feeling, he said, is that "the West German left lacked an easily identifiable foe. Another suggests that the opposition does not have so much to do with Mr. Reagan, but rather represents resistance to over-all American policy."

Vinocur also pointed out, in the Sunday "Week in Review" section on June 6, Schmidt's flip-flop on "peace" protests, a switch born of political fright. Last summer, Schmidt said a demonstration was manipulated by Communists and should have steered some of its

criticism toward the Soviets. "This time, the frontal approach has been abandoned and Mr. Schmidt is dealing with the demonstrations by paraphrasing Voltaire: I may not agree with what you say but I defend to the death your right to do it," Vinocur wrote. Schmidt dismissed a pro-Reagan demonstration in Bonn as superfluous, Vinocur said, and "in a further display of diplomatic understatement, Mr. Schmidt described a bomb blast at an American installation in West Germany early last week as 'no grounds for upset.'"

Given such clear-eyed reporting, without the usual reverence for America's critics, it's no wonder Cockburn is dismayed. "Within the *Times* Vinocur is regarded as a comer," he wrote. Unless Vinocur goes "into direct government service," his brand of reporting "should send him far with the *NYT*," Cockburn complained. Fans of fair-minded, skeptical reporting can imagine worse things happening. §

In the old days of soaring inflation, perhaps there were newspaper and television stories reporting that it was a double-edged sword, hurting some folks but helping others. Maybe the evening news shows, in between their regular forays into grocery stores where prices were rising relentlessly, pointed out that debtors gained from inflation. Maybe it was reported that land speculators were doing quite well. Maybe it's just that I don't remember all those stories.

In any case, since inflation began cooling, both newspapers and TV correspondents have made sure we know that this is not an unmixed blessing. Inflation, they almost seem to be saying, is bad when it rises and bad when it falls. For instance, Caroline Atkinson of the *Washington Post* wrote in June that "lower inflation is good news when you're buying, but bad news when you're selling, and for most of U.S. industry the bad news is now outweighing the good." Sure, she noted, "companies benefit when the prices they have to



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pay for raw materials fall or rise less rapidly. But that gain can be offset when they have to hold down their own prices."

Fine. It's hard to argue with that story, even if it was written by a reporter who specializes in harpooning both Reaganomics and supply-side economics, which, of course, aren't quite the same thing. Legitimate objections can be lodged, though, over a report on the "CBS Evening News" with Dan Rather about March's dip in the inflation rate. "There may be a surprise for many people in today's lower figures," said economics editor Ray Brady. "The incomes of roughly half the nation are tied directly to the consumer price index. And when it goes down, as it did today, so do their incomes. Some examples. Social Security: the exact amount of the drop in payments won't be known for another 30 days, but it's estimated that while last year's checks went up 11.7 percent, the lower inflation rate means those payments will go up only 7.5 percent this year."

The problem here is that there will be no "drop" in payments, though a smaller increase in the cost-of-living adjustment will occur. More significant, however, was the omission of the matter of purchasing power. If Social Security recipients get less of an increase in their checks this year, it is only because prices didn't rise as steeply as the previous year. But the purchasing power of this year's check is the same as last year's.

This story is a reflection of CBS's tough, critical reporting on the recession and on Reagan's economic program. The CBS approach has prompted from political writer Walter Karp a characterization that, if uncorked by some Reagan partisan, would probably be denounced as another paranoid, right-wing delusion. "There was no doubt where CBS Evening News stood on the recession and Reaganomics," Karp wrote in *Channels* magazine. "By mid-January its coverage of hard times had grown powerful, persistent, and grimly eloquent. Shadows of the Great Depression haunted CBS News: frightened old people, huddling at a hot meal center; poor children deprived of school lunches; unemployed young men crowding soup kitchens; victims of budget cuts; victims of hard times; victims of Reagan. Unlike NBC, CBS made no bones of its conviction that Reagan's economic policies were a failure, and a cruel failure at that. Alarmist abroad, compassionate at home, CBS revealed a political character. . . . It represented, with considerable skill

and éclat, the Cold War liberalism of the Democratic party . . . CBS News is virtually a party organ."

That, needless to say, is wildly exaggerated; CBS, after all, is the network that was blamed in the fall of 1979 for allegedly picking on Teddy Kennedy. And veterans of Jimmy Carter's White House don't look back fondly on CBS coverage of their man. But Karp was even-handed in his

sweeping characterizations. ABC, he wrote, "has cast its lot with Reagan and the Republican right. . . . Like most of Reagan's right-wing supporters . . . ABC News has expressed its disappointment with Reagan's foreign policy: Bellicose words have not been translated into bellicose deeds." And NBC? "Old-fashioned Midwestern Republicanism, upright, decent, and cautious; such was the political

character of *NBC Nightly News*, which aptly enough, is the most popular network news show in the Middle West. The network's conservative treatment of economic affairs confirmed this in a dozen ways. . . . Like most Republicans, NBC News seemed determined to give Reagan's economic program 'a chance': it made no effort to link the recession to Reagan's policies." §

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The press blew the 1980 presidential campaign, so mesmerized was it by behind-the-scenes maneuvering and media blitzes and those undying favorites of political reporters, blunders and gaffes. While the press concentrated on such ephemera, the voters were struggling to learn a bit about the issues and where the candidates stood on them. And in the end, the voters went with the guy

who espoused the most coherent, appealing set of ideas—Reagan.

That critique of the Reagan-Carter race may sound like Lyn Nofziger's, but he's not responsible. The author is Jeff Greenfield, a columnist, commentator on CBS, and former associate of political consultant David Garth. Greenfield, who is no conservative, may be the most trenchant, iconoclastic, and compelling political

analyst in the country. Almost alone, he thinks ideas matter in campaigns. Thus, his column in May on Republican Jeffrey Bell's gallant but unsuccessful bid to wrest the New Jersey Senate nomination from Millicent Fenwick was a bouquet. He didn't endorse Bell's supply-side proposals, but cheered his insistence on stressing issues in his TV commercials.

"Jeff Bell's campaign has demon-

strated once again the simpleminded quality of the perennial attacks on political commercials," Greenfield wrote. "No, they do not have to 'substitute slogans for substance.' The candidate for office who wants to can use paid media not to disguise ideological differences, but to highlight them. . . . It's the job of a citizen to watch and to listen and to choose among competing voices. In New Jersey, voters will be able to choose between two sharply different voices. And, from this liberal corner, a tip of the hat to a conservative whose campaign is actually helping the voters to make such a choice."

Greenfield's skewering of the press coverage of the 1980 presidential campaign comes in his new book, *The Real Campaign*. Political reporting on television and in newspapers missed the point of the campaign, he says, and had little influence on the outcome:

The victory of Ronald Reagan was a political victory, a party victory, a victory of more coherent—not necessarily correct, but more coherent—ideas, better expressed, more connected with the reality of their lives, as Americans saw it, than those of Reagan's principal opponents, a victory vastly aided by a better-funded, better organized, more confident and united party. . . . The failure of the mainstream press, and especially television, to recognize the nature of this campaign stemmed in large measure from the media's fascination with itself as a political force, and from its fundamental view that politics is more image than substance; that ideas, policies, positions, and intentions are simply the wrappings in which a power struggle takes place.

Strong stuff, huh? Reporters were so obsessed with tactics that it had become "something of a heresy to suggest that what the candidates were saying was actually of overriding importance," Greenfield contends. " . . . The press's insistence that the struggle for power and position is all that matters, and that the 'who's ahead' question is far more important than boring questions of ideas helped mislead the press about the one question it cares most about—who is going to win?" Otherwise, the press might have figured out that Reagan was going to win handily.

I admit to having committed most of the sins that Greenfield quite accurately cites. But I plead innocent to one of them—attributing Reagan's success to his acting skills, his flair for looking good on TV. "An analysis that attempts to demonstrate Reagan's nominating victory as a consequence of either his media skills or his coverage by the media would fail

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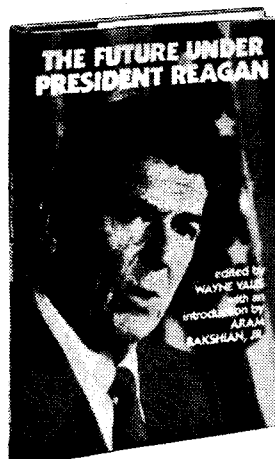
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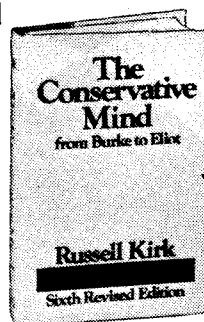
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at almost every turn," Greenfield argues. "For the fact is that Ronald Reagan made his full share of those gaffes, blunders, and mistakes that are supposed to derail the campaigns of potential presidents." They didn't because voters were taken with his ideas. §

With the pummeling CBS endured this spring at the hands of the White House and *TV Guide*, folks at the network of a conspiratorial frame of mind might have concluded that the right wing was piling on with malice aforethought. And if they didn't jump to this conclusion on their own, well, Tom Shales, the acerbic television critic of the *Washington Post*, was available to show the way. "Conspiracy theories in this country don't just come cheap," he wrote in a review excoriating *TV Guide* for attacking CBS. "They're free. Why, if you really had a mind to, you could dredge up heaps of circumstantial evidence suggesting [TV Guide owner Walter] Annenberg has a vested political interest in anything that makes the network boys look like

rascals." The truth is, Shales said, he's a buddy of Richard Nixon, a pal of Reagan.

What touched off the Shales tirade was the magazine's article in May entitled "Anatomy of a Smear: How CBS News Broke the Rules and 'Got' Gen. Westmoreland." The article, impressively documented though occasionally overstated, accused CBS of "inaccuracies, distortions and violations of journalistic standards" in a 90-minute show in January. That show, billed as "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," had attacked General William C. Westmoreland for allegedly underestimating the enemy's forces in Vietnam in order to convince his superiors in Washington that the war was going well.

With access to some internal CBS documents, *TV Guide* reporters Don Kowet and Sally Bedell wrote that the show's producers had stacked the deck against Westmoreland, keeping out exculpatory material, coaching a friendly witness, yanking quotes out of context, and misrepresenting some events. "We do not know whether [the CBS producers] were right about

General Westmoreland and his military-intelligence operation," they wrote. "We can say, however, that 'The Uncounted Enemy' was often arbitrary and unfair in its approach to a subject that surely demanded all the objectivity and thoroughness that the journalists of CBS News could muster."

More broadly, "the network's lapses in the making of this documentary also raise larger questions," Kowet and Bedell said. "Are the network news divisions, with their immense power to influence the public's ideas about politics and recent history, doing enough to keep their own houses in order? If this documentary is any evidence, then the answer may be no." In snarling at *TV Guide*, Shales didn't ask such questions, and he hardly mentioned the magazine's evidence at all. "There definitely is a limit, though, on how seriously these charges should be taken," he huffed. After all, the *Post* had reviewed the show favorably when it was aired back in January.

The *TV Guide* criticism came on the heels of a CBS squabble with the White House over an hour-long show

by Bill Moyers called "People Like Us." It was about alleged victims of Reagan's budget cuts, and David R. Gergen, the White House communications director, asked the network to allow an Administration spokesman to appear on the show to deflect any blame. CBS refused on the perfectly appropriate ground that Administration officials get plenty of network time to air their views.

But aside from the questionable ploy of seeking rebuttal time, the White House did unusually well in combat with a television network, combat that often is self-defeating because it brings back memories of Spiro T. Agnew and his crusade against the networks. The White House strategy was to keep Reagan out of the spat, have Gergen deliver some overall criticism of the show, and let the Department of Health and Human Services pick apart the particulars of the four cases chronicled by CBS. Shales might have frowned on this counterattack, but then his misty-eyed admiration of CBS News is tempered only when he catches the network going after Teddy Kennedy too harshly. □



A SEPARATE PEACE

We are collected by our German hosts at the Cologne/Bonn airport, and suddenly a number of tired American travelers who minutes before in Frankfurt were oblivious of one another begin to partake in friendly introductions all around. On the spur of the moment, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has invited a group of American journalists representing five opinion magazines, ten major metropolitan dailies, several news services and labor publications—and including two free-lance feminists—for an "information" visit to Bonn and Berlin on the eve of President Reagan's European trip and the NATO summit. As the think-tank arm of the faltering West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Helmut Schmidt, the foundation has arranged the trip to clarify the West German position on the many issues disrupt-

Wladyslaw Pleszczynski is managing editor of *The American Spectator*.

ing relations between Bonn and Washington, as well as to reassure the United States of West Germany's boundless devotion to the Western Alliance.

On the bus to Bonn, one of the



Germans asks about my previous trips to his country and my impressions. Assuming we are still exchanging pleasantries, I recall six wonderful days spent in the Bavarian Alps in 1973. But my host is serious: "A lot has changed since then," he cautions, and indeed it has. As late as 1979 there seemed to be no such thing as the peace movement, no revulsion at U.S.-NATO strategies, no deeply felt suspicion of U.S. intentions. In a continent shaken by Eurocommunism and Hollanditis, the United States could at least look to West Germany as its staunchest supporter in the Alliance.

Then came the election of Ronald Reagan, which—Schmidt's open contempt for Jimmy Carter notwithstanding—caught West Germans unawares. In America, the Reagan victory symbolized renewed recognition of the USSR as a global menace. West Germany, however, conditioned by the procedures of détente,

simply has refused to budge from viewing the Soviets in anything but European terms. "By the way," Willy Brandt was to remark to us in several days, "the Federal Republic of Germany is not a world power and has no ambition to be one. We are a medium-sized power in Europe"—an ingenious formula which washes West German hands of any greater responsibility in meeting the Soviet threat. As President Reagan sadly learned in Europe in June, the easiest way for the United States to heal the rift that has developed between Bonn and Washington is to subscribe to the views of NATO's European minions.

But our German allies should not delude themselves into thinking that the major source of the problem has been Ronald Reagan, nor spend too much time assuming that eventually Reagan will have to "come around."