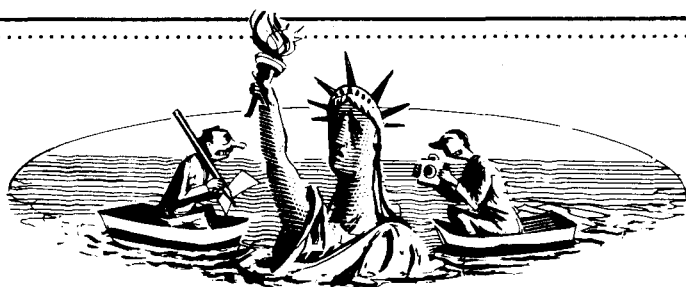


## PRESSWATCH



### FOOLS FOR GRENADA

by Fred Barnes

Contrary to what has become the conventional wisdom among conservatives, the White House and the Pentagon were not entirely blameless in the squabble with the press over covering the invasion of Grenada. The night before the invasion, the White House lied—it may have been an inadvertent lie, but it was a lie nonetheless—in denying that an invasion was planned. If you think lying is admissible under the circumstances, fine; I don't. Regardless, the lying in this instance was unnecessary. A simple "No comment" or "I don't have anything I can give you on that" would have sufficed. At the Pentagon, there was a little too much joy in thwarting the press. Given the Vietnam experience, the joy was understandable. Still, it was excessive. Reporters surely could have been given full access to Grenada sooner, maybe two or three days sooner. Some sneaked in anyway without harming themselves, the military mission, or the truth. Both the White House and the Pentagon, wrote ombudsman Robert J. McCloskey of the *Washington Post*, "created needless controversy" that did not help the President. McCloskey is quite right.

Yet to its credit, the Administration did not play the fool in the Grenada episode. That familiar role was left to the sole dominion of the press. When its own interests are involved, the press routinely acts foolishly. This time, it was absurdly excessive in talking about "secrecy" and "censorship" as practiced by the Reagan Administration. The *New York Times* editorially likened what it called the Administration's "trying to keep the public in the dark" on the Grenada maneuver with the Soviets' refusal to allow newsmen near the spot where Korean Air Lines flight 007 was shot down. No kidding, that's what the editorial said. And it appeared the same day that the paper devoted three-quarters of its front page and more than five pages inside the

first section to Grenada news. Some kind of secrecy.

The press failed to perform one of its fundamental duties—distinguishing between intention and reality. Certainly the White House and the Pentagon sought to control the flow of information about the invasion tightly, at least in the first two days. They failed. Information gushed out. But the press reacted as if the Administration's effort had succeeded. Thomas Shales, the TV critic of the *Washington Post*, called it "the little war that wasn't there—not there on the American television screen, where one would have expected to find it." He seemed to equate the absence of combat footage taken by network cameramen with no coverage at all. The networks, of course, had lots of film; it just wasn't of the Marines hitting the beach or the Army Rangers parachuting from 500 feet onto the Point Salines airfield. The public miraculously learned of both these the

day they occurred. Folks found out the old-fashioned way: The Pentagon disclosed them and newspapers and broadcasters passed the information along.

Most of the press criticism of the Administration included the disingenuous reminder that reporters had been allowed to accompany troops on the major battles of World War II. "Why did he [the President] bar the press from the invasion of that small island as General Eisenhower did not feel it necessary to do when his forces challenged the might of the Nazis?" asked Anthony Lewis in the *New York Times*. He answered his own question, saying Reagan feared the real facts would come out and his reasons for the invasion would be exposed as empty. Well, they have and they weren't. But I suspect fear of the facts wasn't the reason the Administration didn't invite the press along. It was fear of the press.

In World War II, reporters did quite

a lot of cheerleading. They also did some criticizing, but the press in those days hadn't adopted its current adversarial pose. (I shouldn't call it a pose; it's the real thing.) Anyway, reporters were often trusted by the Pentagon during World War II. And if they weren't, there was the practice of military censorship to make sure their battlefield reports weren't too revealing. Would any reporters nowadays submit to official censorship by their own government? A few, but not many. And should a reporter agree to rules of censorship and then defy those rules to break a story knocking the military, the press would more than likely bestow on him some sort of First Amendment Award. The press's sense of responsibility simply goes awry on occasion, as was demonstrated several days before the Grenada invasion when CBS News aired some film of John DeLorean's alleged drug dealing. DeLorean's constitutional right to a fair trial was jeopardized, but no conceivable public purpose was served. It's hard to trust people who would do that.

A segment of the press takes its duty to consist not in providing an account of events but in knocking down the government's stated reasons for these events. It is the gotcha approach: the government makes a claim, we come up with counter-evidence—gotcha. Seldom has the press's appetite for gotcha stories been more whetted than in the case of the Grenada invasion. What had reporters drooling was the chance to rebut the claim that the medical students on Grenada were in danger and needed to be rescued. Even before any of the students had returned, the *Washington Post* ran a story to the effect that "Americans in Grenada were not in danger before U.S. Marines and Army Rangers landed there yesterday despite President Reagan's statement to the contrary."

Only this gotcha story turned out to



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be both premature and wrong. This time the shoe was on the other foot. The press suspected the students weren't endangered, the students said just the opposite—gotcha. The press was left thunderstruck. In truth, you didn't have to be a knee-jerk cynic or Reaganophobe to be surprised that the students backed Reagan's claim as dramatically as they did. In their wildest dreams, Reagan and his aides couldn't have imagined students kissing the ground at Charleston Air Force Base or a self-confessed dove saying he was now the champion of the military or a woman saying that Reagan had saved her life "literally." The *Washington Post* more than made up

for its misguided gotcha story. Its report of the students' return was better than any other publication's, with reporter Ward Sinclair writing that the students "painted a tableau of fear, bloodshed and chaos."

The trouble with the press is that it wants to play two roles at once, the relentless adversary of the government and the eyes and ears of the public. But the two don't always fit well together. The public wants eyes and ears, but probably not ones that are poisonously adversarial and self-righteous about it. As ever, the press admits to no conflict between the two. In barring reporters from accompanying the invading forces and then from circulating freely

around Grenada, the Administration wanted to make sure the public reached the "right conclusion," wrote Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*. The way to achieve this, he said, "is to silence one side of the debate." Now, that's a nice way of putting it, except that this was not some congressional fight over curbing the Freedom of Information Act. It was a life-and-death situation, one in which the press's proper role was to do more than provide "one side of the debate." That's the job of Walter Mondale, Alan Cranston & Co., not the press.

Despite playing the fool in the spat over restraints on coverage, the press did remarkably well in actually reporting the

Grenada story. Several papers recounted the initial reaction of the rescued students, then returned to them a few days later to make certain the students' accounts had not been revised by cooler-headed hindsight. *Newsweek* recovered flashily from a year or more of being trounced by *Time*. Its extensive coverage of the war was strikingly superior, especially its piece on Fidel Castro's thwarted intentions in the Caribbean. Amazingly, a reporter and photographer for *Newsweek* flouted the Administration's rules and slipped into Grenada on their own, interviewing Grenadians and American soldiers, taking pictures and returning to tell about it. Strange are the ways of secrecy and censorship. □

## THE NATION'S PULSE



### A NEW CONSERVATISM

by Lewis Lehrman

In 1982, as many readers of *The American Spectator* know, I ran for governor of New York. In the months that have passed since the election, there has been no shortage of experts to explain my loss. Some say I put too much emphasis on public order, a crackdown on crime, and the restoration of the death penalty. Others claim my call for a 40 percent tax-rate reduction was out of touch with the inevitable economic fate of socialism in one state, as in New York. Still others argue that my unapologetic defense of traditional family values was passé in a world of singles bars and palimony lawsuits. My opponent, Mario Cuomo, said after the election that I sounded too much like Ronald Reagan.

I take pride in that comparison; but the real reason for my defeat, I believe, goes much deeper. There was in fact a secret anti-red suspender campaign against me! Indeed, it was the only anti-red campaign ever supported by the New York City

media. Wherever I went journalists would ask, "Lehrman, why do you wear red suspenders?" My answer was forthright: "I wear them to keep my pants up." Reporters, however, are trendy, and some press gurus saw my poor red suspenders as another great conservative issue, like



the Panama Canal. On this one, I shall not yield. I bought them, I paid for them, and I'm going to keep them.

Right now we may have the most conservative President we are likely to see in our lifetimes, a President dedicated to thorough-going reform of our nation's institutions in order to uphold the everlasting and constitutional values that made our country prosperous and free. Now, unfortunately, there is drift concerning how best to attain the goals of the Reagan mandate. If there is anything I have learned as a rookie politician, it is that to establish a goal without the appropriate means to reach that goal is to court political disaster. On this issue, there is a split today between conservatives that hobbles us. It is a division between those who sincerely believe in a slow, gradual reform and those who favor more activist measures.

It is not a new problem. Thirteen years ago, Frank Meyers made the following observation:

There is a real contradiction between the deep piety of the conservative spirit towards tradition, the preservation of the fibre of society, and the more reasoned, consciously principled, militant conservatism which becomes necessary when the fibres of society have been rudely torn apart, when . . . revolutionary principles ride high, and restoration, not preservation, is the order of the day.

In this spirit, I would argue that the times demand activist measures if we are to restore the liberties and values that have been systematically subverted for over a generation. Consider, for example, three pressing areas in need of reform: the tax system, the federal judiciary, and our monetary system.

For the second year in a row, we are facing a budget deficit of colossal proportions. Yet what has been the response? More taxes: a tax on gasoline; a tax on health benefits; a double payroll tax on the self-employed; a tax on Social Security benefits; a tax on petroleum production; a contingency surtax on personal and corporate income. This tax increase does not invoke the shape of a more limited government. No one can seriously believe that Congress will really use these taxes to balance the budget. Following established procedure, they will be used merely as an invitation to more spending.

What we ought to be doing is moving in the exact opposite direction, toward lower taxes and control on expenditures. In a recent book called *Low Tax, Simple Tax, Flat Tax*,\* two economists from Stanford, Robert E. Hall and Alvin Rabushka, have developed an impressive case for a flat tax. Their evidence suggests

\*McGraw-Hill, \$9.95 pbk.

Lewis Lehrman is founder of *The Lehrman Institute*, a public policy forum for the study of economics and foreign policy and state and local government problems. He is co-author of *The Case for Gold*, and has written for *Harper's*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.