

Tells the Facts and Names the Names

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The Shalit Paradigm Young Liars of the Right

Ruth Shalit glows in the knowledge that at the age of 25 she is the most successful of the young, conservative writers now patrolling the opinion pages or sporting their prejudices in the Sunday magazines. Shalit has a \$45,000 contract with *CQ*, showed up in *The New York Times Magazine* with a cover story on Bob Dole, and recently gained pleasing notoriety with an attack in *The New Republic* (where she is an associate editor) on affirmative action at *The Washington Post*.

Shalit (pronounced "shall eat") has made all the proper moves along a path well trodden by careerists seeking fortune in right-wing journalism. First, attacks on "multiculturalism" or "PC" while at a college newspaper; next, arrival within the Beltway as an aide to a political figure or for one of the Right's think tanks; then on to work at a conservative publication.

This sort of career is distinguished by calculated forays into racism, in the manner of Dinesh D'Souza; boorishness, as with Emmett Tyrrell and P. J. O'Rourke; and a hostility to truth so blatant as often to amount to vulgar lying. Shalit embodies all of these unattractive traits. After patient scrutiny of her 13-page article on the *Post*, which created a great journalistic stir in Washington, we can report at least 50 mistakes, distortions and perversions of fact, an average of one per roughly 250 words. Incompetence and journalistic malfeasance on this scale would normally finish off a career.

Shalit's Oct. 2 story in *The New Republic*, "Race In The Newsroom: *The Washington Post* in black and white", claimed that the *Post*'s "determined diversity hiring" has produced a strong backlash, with both white and black reporters feeling "aggrieved and

victimized by discrimination". According to Shalit, black staffers at the *Post*, apparently acting out of racial solidarity, have sought to cover up the failures of the city's political elite. Furthermore, the newspaper's once aggressive "coverage of the social pathologies at the heart of Washington's black underclass—chronic welfare dependence, adolescent child-bearing, neighborhood crime and violence—has increasingly given way to puffery".

We've often criticized the *Post*, a newspaper which in recent years has carefully leached out any tincture of liberalism. But Shalit's piece wasn't about the *Post*. In the tradition of D'Souza and Charles Murray, it was an attack on African Americans, dressed up as social science.

Editors "will end up with a nearly all-white staff," Shalit wrote, "if they hire purely on the basis of qualifications. A "newspaper's mandate—to be an arbiter of truth, an enemy of euphemism, a check on social complacency—is directly at odds with the ideology of diversity management, with its ethos of sensitivity and conflict avoidance at all costs".

Yet despite attempts to diversify, the *Post* is still largely a white institution—minority journalists make up roughly 18 percent of its professional staff—in a city which is overwhelmingly black and minority. "Why shouldn't black people be encouraged to write about a black city and black government?" asks Jill Nelson, who chronicled her 1986 to 1990 tenure at the *Post* in *Volunteer Slavery*. "White men have traditionally held a privileged position in the world of journalism. When occasional attempts to level the playing field have been made, white men, and sometimes white women, have freaked out."

Shalit calls herself a "social liberal", and insists that she "tried to be scrupu-

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The Book On Numbers: How The Park Police Count

Do the National Park Police deliberately undercount political protesters? In the aftermath of the October 16 Million Man March, that question rose again—as it has after virtually every major political demonstration held in the capital for the past thirty years.

When the Park Police announced that 400,000 people had attended the March, Louis Farrakhan, its chief organizer, declared that “racism” and “white supremacy” had prompted an underestimate. Farrakhan threatened to sue and the Park Police, who are charged by Congress with making the official crowd count for events held in the capital, agreed to allow Boston University’s Center for Remote Sensing to do a computer recount using aerial photos of the march. The Center’s tally of 837,000 was short of the Nation of Islam’s figure of 1.2 million but more than double the Park Police’s original estimate, making the Million Man March, officially, the biggest political rally ever held in Washington.

Up until about ten years ago, police employed the SWAG system—Scientific Wild-Assed Guess—to gauge crowd size. Now, police say they use a grid system to

determine how many people can fit on a given area of land, then factor in crowd density, subway ridership and the number of cars and buses in city parking lots.

But of course politics condition the numbers. Before the Million Man March, the Park Police listed the 1969 Vietnam Moratorium Day protest as the biggest ever held in the capital, recording its size at 600,000 people. On the day of the event, police declared that only 250,000 people had attended.

Even that figure was too high for the Nixon administration. A month after the event, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird claimed that just 119,000 protesters had taken part, basing this estimate, he said, on an analysis of Air Force photos.

By April 23, 1971, the date of another gigantic anti-war rally—200,000 according to police, at least three times that amount according to the organizers—the official size of the Moratorium Day protest had mysteriously risen. A *New York Times* account of the 1971 event, citing police estimates, said that the crowd “did not approach in numbers the 320,000 who gathered around the Washington Monument in November, 1969”. Dave Dellinger, a leader of the anti-war movement, tells us that police perennially under-counted protesters’ numbers. “Of course, our side had a tendency to overestimate”, Dellinger recalls, “but the police went far further in the other direction. We finally started hiring independent experts and found that our numbers were generally about twice the official count.”

Some of the angriest arguments about crowd size have taken place during the past few years. In April of 1993, gay and lesbian rights activists announced a crowd of 1 million for a demonstration at the Mall. Police said that just 300,000 people had attended the event.

The police estimate was based on a series of aerial photos, the last one taken at 2:55 p.m. That was about 90 minutes before the crowd reached its peak and at a point when the Mall was still filling with protesters. Using aerial photos and other data, *The Washington Blade*, a gay weekly, determined that 750,000 people had participated in the rally—250,000 less than demonstrators claimed but 450,000

more than police claimed.

Torie Osborn, a long-time gay political activist and writer, served as liaison with Park Police at an earlier gay rights march, in October of 1987, with organizers estimating the crowd at 500,000. She was pleasantly surprised when the police officer she worked with told her that the official count was 375,000. “That was lower than our figure, but, given the usual discrepancies, I was relieved,” Osborn recalls. The following day, though, she was amazed to read newspaper accounts of the march which referred to a Park Police estimate of just 200,000. That number became the official tally for the day’s rally.

Another controversy arose in 1989, when an abortion-rights rally at the Washington Monument drew 300,000 according to the Park Police and twice that number according to organizers. The initial police count was less than 100,000, but organizers were able to negotiate a higher number because they had lined up a 6-member crew—including an engineer, a landscape architect and a mathematician—which challenged the official tally.

The clearest example of how politics can influence the police count came in April of 1992, during another abortion rights protest. Organizers claimed that 750,000 people rallied, while the Park Police settled on a figure of 500,000.

Two weeks later, after anti-abortion leader Rep. Christopher Smith of New Jersey demanded a recount, Park Police issued a new number: the crowd had been cut in half. “After completing [a recheck of bus and subway ridership and reviewing photos], the . . . estimate [of 250,000] was confirmed,” Richard Powers of the Park Police wrote to Smith.

When the cause is non-controversial, the Park Police can be generous with numbers. According to police records, the most heavily attended event ever held in Washington was Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 inauguration, which drew 1.2 million. However, people who attended the inauguration, as well as photos taken that day, suggest that the official number is grossly inflated.

The next three biggest events in the capital, according to Park Police, were 1 million at the July 4, 1976 Bicentennial celebration, and 800,000 each for Bill Clinton’s 1993 inauguration and the June, 1991 Persian Gulf War homecoming. “They want to prove that patriotism draws more than protest, and that just isn’t so,” Osborn says. ■

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