

# Blaming the Messenger

*Two new books hark back to a media "golden age" that never existed*

**By Gregg Easterbrook**

**W**ANT TO WRITE A BOOK YOU CAN BE certain no one else is writing? Pen something defending the press. Recent years have seen a spate of volumes denouncing American journalism. James Fallows lit bombs under the profession in *Breaking the News*, accusing top communications-industry figures of posturing, buck-raking, and even anti-Americanism. (His chapter on Mike Wallace so ruffled its subject that Wallace took to defending himself by saying that he shouldn't be held accountable for comments made under the pressure of live television, a delightfully nonsensical position coming from a *60 Minutes* correspondent.) Howard Kurtz, in *Hot Air* and *Spin Cycle*, presented modern journalism as an exercise bordering on self-satire, with the goal being to see which news organization could make itself seem stupidest fastest. Tom Rosentiel and Bill Kovach, in *Warp Speed*, depict the contemporary newsroom as spinning into a blur of unthinking hype. Now comes *Republic of Denial* and *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, two more books that let the media have it with both barrels. Isn't there anybody out there who likes the morning newspaper anymore?

*Republic of Denial* is by Michael Janeway, one of the country's most distinguished journalists, a former editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and the *Boston Globe*. It is Janeway's thesis that all major American news organizations are in "denial" regarding "the story that the press has largely missed," namely, that the country is falling apart. Janeway posits that the contemporary condition of the United States is far, far worse than television newscasters or newsmagazines are letting on: that modern American life is "a saga of reversal and loss" with U.S. cities "choking on dysfunction," plague-

like diseases about to kill us, the plight of average people worsening, and "erosion of optimism and progress." Journalists are in "denial," Janeway suggests, by refusing to report such bad news, preferring instead presidential sex scandals, celebrity divorce melodramas, and political insider-baseball. Nobody's reporting the real, shocking, depressingly negative story.

This is a striking thesis. But after stating it, *Republic of Denial* essentially drops its own subject, saying little more about the condition of the country and switching to an analysis of the recent history of political journalism. If, as Janeway posits, the United States is actually falling apart, it seems that

should be the subject of the book. Indeed, public interest would require an author to write on nothing else. But Janeway simply asserts this thesis with next to no documentation; he doesn't even explain why, if the country is going to hell in a handbasket, the *Boston Globe* did not focus on this story while he was running it.

The few examples Janeway gives of "denial" subjects are debatable. For instance, he warns of an unreported menace of "back-from-the-dead bacteria more powerful than the postwar wonder drugs." But mutation among common germ strains, especially strep and staph, has received quite a bit of press coverage, including on national television; it was a headline story the week the galleys of *Republic of Denial* landed on my desk. And the issue is not bacteria becoming "more powerful" than antibiotics; rather, some are acquiring resistance, requiring that a new generation of drugs be tested and fielded. This is definitely a problem, but no budding disaster; by almost every measure, including high longevity and declining cancer incidence, U.S. public health is improving.

Janeway's book is erudite and well-written, but the author seems not to have been able to resolve whether he was producing a treatise or a memoir. He

**REPUBLIC OF DENIAL:  
Press, Politics and Public  
Life**

*By Michael Janeway*  
Yale University Press, \$22.50

**RICH MEDIA, POOR  
DEMOCRACY:  
Communications Politics in  
Dubious Times**

*By Robert W. McClesney*  
University of Illinois Press,  
\$32.95

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spends considerable time reminding us that the news business is a business, and that is something every viewer and reader ought to bear in mind. But Janeway treats this as a sinister fact, never answering the obvious question: Well, what's wrong with being a business? *Republic of Denial* devotes several pages to the arrival of Mark Willes as publisher of *The Los Angeles Times*. Willes is a former cereal marketing executive who scared the wits out of responsible editors like Janeway by suggesting that the time had come to take down the wall between advertising and editorial. The book presents Willes as the harbinger of a frightening future. Perhaps, but during Willes's tenure *The Los Angeles Times* continued to be excellent—it now rivals for first-place in quality *The New York Times*, a fact not well known on the East Coast—and anyway, Willes has since left that job. Rather than a warning, the Willes term of office in Los Angeles seems a bump in the road.

*Rich Media, Poor Media* by Robert McChesney, a University of Illinois professor and eminent media critic, is a book all *Washington Monthly* devotees will find tremendously exciting, for it is perhaps the first volume ever to treat neoliberalism as important enough to be denounced. Big media conglomerates such as Disney (owner of ABC and ESPN) and Time-Warner, McChesney says, have expropriated the neoliberal philosophy (of traditional liberal goals sought by private-sector means) and used it as a cover for expanding their market power and profits. *The Washington Monthly* has been advancing the concept of neoliberalism for two decades now, and although this philosophy can claim constructive impact on public policy, few have taken neoliberalism seriously enough to get upset about it. McChesney gets upset; in fact, he considers neoliberalism a looming conspiracy. At last the *Monthly* stands accused of participating in a conspiracy! (On something other than Amtrak subsidies for West Virginia.) This, to the magazine's loyalists, should be a red-letter day.

McChesney's contention is that the expansion of big media conglomerates works against democracy by allowing establishment-flavored opinion to dominate the news. He notes, for example, that Disney has jumped from a \$2.9 billion company by sales in 1988 to a \$25 billion concern last year, while Time-Warner jumped from \$7.6 billion (combined, before its merger) in 1988 to \$28 billion last year, mainly by snatching up media properties. A "noncompetitive, oligopolistic" media structure results, with dissenting views filtered out.

*Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, a carefully document-

ed and detailed work, is surely right to caution against the effects on the news business of profit-oriented management. It is disturbing to think that the three largest media conglomerates—Disney, Time-Warner and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, whose best-known holding is Fox Network—dedicate only a tiny percentage of their efforts to work of quality, while pouring billions into junk, junk, junk. (Including violence-glorifying junk, which the entertainment divisions of Disney and Time-Warner now specialize in, caring not in the slightest about the psyches of the next generation.) McChesney is also right to caution that the Internet may not be able to sustain its present democratization effect on media, if the big boys gradually take it over, too. These are important points.

But *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* is undercut by a kind of non-reflective, conventional leftism. McChesney believes that the news produced by big conglomerates "is far from politically neutral or 'objective,'" but seems here to be calling on the delineation of objectivity that equates to, "Objective news is whatever I agree with." He complains, for example, of "a virtual blackout of media coverage of the CIA," this in a year when CIA failures on the Chinese embassy and Sudan bombings, the India nuclear blast and other issues have been a running headline item. He sees the withdrawal of the Time-CNN story claiming nerve gas use against U.S. deserters in Vietnam as suppression of an exposé, but seems to want so badly for this story to have been true that he gives no credence to the shaky, shaky sources behind the work. McChesney asserts that the big media don't question defense spending, because "military spending is the one form of government largesse that directly harms no notable upper-class interest." But in the papers I read, the Pentagon budget is a running subject of critical coverage. All major newspapers and newscasts, for example, recently gave prominent play to a House subcommittee vote against the proposed F22 fighter, a Pentagon-infuriating story the media could be accused of overplaying, given that the vote was preliminary and inconclusive.

Both *Republic of Denial* and *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* are chock-full of erudition, facts, and quotes, but in the end suffer from a common problem in the very journalism they decry—after you finish these books, you feel that you understand the subject less than before you started. Perhaps this is because both volumes employ an implied golden-age argument, that once the media were scrupulous and effective, but no more. When was the media golden age, anyway? When big cities had four dailies, but

most were openly ideological, usually conservative? When there were only three television networks, and anything that didn't fit the standard primetime formula was never aired? When there was no Web, so that readers couldn't read and evaluate for themselves

the source documents on which stories are based? The golden age of journalism occurred only in our minds. In the real daily interplay of media, opinion, and business, things may go well or poorly, but on balance, the news always seems to win out. ●

# Taking on Big Tobacco

*The struggle against tobacco companies is far from over*

**By Michael Massing**

**T**HE FIGHT AGAINST BIG TOBACCO HAS given rise to a burgeoning literature. In 1996, Richard Kluger published *Ashes to Ashes*, his impressive history of the rise of Philip Morris and the efforts to contain it. Soon after came Stanton Glantz's *The Cigarette Papers*, a collection of internal documents from Brown & Williamson, and Philip J. Hilts's *Smokescreen*, an examination of the industry's marketing practices. Last year appeared Peter Pringle's *Cornered: Big Tobacco at the Bar of Justice*, a look at the lawyers involved in suing the industry. Now comes *Assuming the Risk*, by Michael Orey, an editor at *The Wall Street Journal* and a former writer and editor at *The American Lawyer*, describing "the Mavericks, the Lawyers, and the Whistle-Blowers Who Beat Big Tobacco" as his subtitle puts it.

Enough already, you might say. But the effort to rein in the nation's tobacco companies has been one of the most significant and fascinating political developments of the decade. Certainly the swiftness with which this once-impregnable industry was brought low has been breathtaking. The subtitle to Richard Kluger's book—"America's Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris"—was obsolete almost as soon as it appeared, with Philip Morris suddenly subject to once-unimaginable controls. The campaign against tobacco is now being emulated in many other fields.

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MICHAEL MASSING's book *The Fix* (Simon & Schuster), about the nation's drug policy, received The Washington Monthly's 1998 Political Book Award.

## **ASSUMING THE RISK:**

**The Mavericks, the Lawyers, and the Whistle-Blowers Who Beat Big Tobacco**

*By Michael Orey*  
Little, Brown \$24.95

In several cities, for instance, supporters of gun control are seeking to hold gun manufacturers responsible for deaths and injuries their products have caused. The families of the three victims in the 1997 school shooting in West Paducah, Ky., have filed suit against the makers and distributors of violent movies and video games alleged to have been watched by the gunman. And grassroots organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving are exploring new ways to rein in the nation's alcohol companies, whose products take the lives of an estimated 100,000 Americans a year.

So, from a public-health standpoint, any new insights that can be gleaned from the great offensive against tobacco are to be welcomed. In *Assuming the Risk*, Michael Orey focuses on events in Mississippi—the first of the more than 40 states to sue the tobacco companies for the recovery of public funds spent treating the victims of smoking-induced diseases. Divided into three parts, the book relies heavily on personalities. The first part tells the story of Don Barrett, an attorney in a poverty-stricken county who brings suit against the American Tobacco Company on behalf of Nathan Henry Horton, a local black man who died of lung cancer at the age of 50. A one-time good-ol'-boy who as a youth participated in a cross-burning, Barrett had a religious awakening, and he emerged as a crusader against the evil of Big Tobacco. With scant resources, Barrett mounts a spirited case, and of the 114 individual suits brought against the industry nationwide, his is among the few actually to go to trial.

But American Tobacco, deploying a team of inves-