

Tilting at Windmills

by Charles Peters, founding editor



Faster than a speeding snail

How quickly has the Bush administration moved to fix the obvious holes in the Homeland Security net? You will recall that on 9/11, it seemed that no one was in charge of defending Washington. It took 50 minutes after the first World Trade Center tower was hit before an Air Force fighter reached Washington, which unfortunately happened to be 10 minutes after another plane crashed into the Pentagon. Three years and nine days later, on September 20, 2004, there was this news from the AP: "The Pentagon has established a new military headquarters whose mission is to defend the nation's capital."

This item is classified

"The federal government last year spent \$6.5 billion to create 14 million new classified documents, a 60 percent increase over 2001," reports Audrey Hudson of *The Washington Times*. Suspecting that the Bush administration might be over-classifying, Reps. David Obey (D-Wisc.) and Martin Sabo (D-Minn.) recently complained to the Government Accountability Office: "We are baffled as to how a telephone list containing only government phone numbers can be determined to contain sensitive information." Maybe they haven't heard about the Department of Homeland Security stamping "Official Use Only" on a document inviting workers to a going-away party featuring "Krispy Kreme doughnuts and coffee."

Missing the point

During the 2000 campaign, the press gave more attention to Gore's

exaggerations than to Bush's lies. Will it turn out to have made similar errors of emphasis this time? The CBS scandal does not inspire optimism.

Within a few days after "60 Minutes" broadcast its scoop about George W. Bush's now-and-then service in the National Guard, the story for the rest of the media became almost exclusively not about Bush but about the failings of CBS, Dan Rather, and his producer Mary Mapes. Evidence that the facts alleged in the story were true was either ignored or buried. Consider the first mention in *The Washington Post* that Col. Killian's secretary, Marianne Knox, had confirmed that the documents accurately reflected the views of Col. Killian. The *Post's* Howard Kurtz put this fact in the 12th paragraph of a story, the preceding paragraphs of which had dealt not with whether the story was true, but whether the letters were fake.

Actually, Rather's original story had supplied a long-missing piece of the puzzle about Bush's National Guard service. It had been rumored for years that Ben Barnes, a former lieutenant governor of Texas and longtime political powerhouse in the state, had pulled strings to get Bush into the Guard. Rather now had Barnes on camera confirming for the first time that this was true. If Rather had nothing else, this should have been news. But it was totally ignored or buried in the rest of the media's account of the CBS story. For example, in a long *Post* story by Kurtz and two of his colleagues that began on page one, Barnes's revelation was not mentioned until the continued por-

tion on page 27 and even then not until the 12th paragraph. On that same page, Marianne Knox's statement "I know Dan Rather is right" does not appear until 40 paragraphs later.

In a more recent *Post* article by Jennifer Frey about Mary Mapes, CBS' producer of the Guard story, the possibility that Mapes's story is true does not appear until the 35th paragraph. I guess you could call this an improvement. But of course, the point of all this is that far too few in the media seemed to get that the truth of the allegations about Bush were equally as important as the authenticity of the documents. The *Post's* Anne Applebaum argues that the two issues are inseparable. She's wrong. One story is about CBS, the other about Bush. And it is that story that the *Post* and most of the rest of the media blew.

Musical comedy

One of the great musical comedies, "Of Thee I Sing," was revived at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse this September. I wish I could have been there, because the show contains three of my favorite songs—"Who Cares?," "Love is Sweeping the Country," and, of course, "Of Thee I Sing." Indeed, I once used the latter two in a show I did in summer stock during a brief career in the theater when I was in my early twenties. The play was Moliere's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme." I also threw in a couple of Cole Porter songs I liked. This may help explain the brevity of my stay in show business.

Pretty in pink

"Republicans are way freakier, probably because they are more

repressed," one Manhattan sex worker told *New York* magazine after the recent GOP convention. Another, a dominatrix, said: "It always surprises me how many of my clients are not just Republicans but Bush supporters. I think, 'You want me to force you down on your knees when you're in a pink tutu.'" Who do you think would look best in a pink tutu? Karl Rove? Rummy? Wolfowitz?

Ahead of the curve

Speaking of Wolfowitz, did you know that in the Jan. 22, 2001, issue of *The New Yorker*, Nicholas Lemann's "Letter From Washington" was titled "The Iraq Factor" and identified Wolfowitz as the leader of many officials, "including people close to George W. Bush," who were determined to overthrow Saddam Hussein. This article, more than a year ahead of the pack, has to win the Peters Prize for Early Identification of the Administration's Obsession With Iraq.

Gynecologists v. radiologists

Speaking of Peters Prizes, the one for medical reporting goes to *The Wall Street Journal*. In just the last couple of months, *Journal* reporters have identified "Two Simple Tests that can Identify Strokes, but Few Get Them," exposed inflated hospital bills in which uninsured patients are victimized by big markups, and revealed that most gynecologists do not tell their patients about an alternative to hysterectomies. The alternative is a treatment for fibroid tumors called Uterine Artery Embolization, or UAE. A recent survey of 100 UAE patients found that 79 had not heard of this procedure from gynecologists but from other sources. Why are the gynecologists so reluctant to

impart this information? They would lose the \$2,000 fee they charge for a hysterectomy. UAEs are performed by radiologists.

Side effects

Another story in the *Journal*, this about the recent Vioxx recall, calls to mind a point this magazine made four years ago (Stephen Pomper's "Drug Rush," May 2000) about the limited resources the FDA devotes to "studying the safety of medical products after they're already approved." Most of the FDA's budget goes to the drug approval process, with little left for finding out about any harm the drugs do once they're in use. This, of course, reflects the priorities of the drug companies. But the damage it does is not a trivial matter. "Adverse reactions to drugs kill more than one hundred thousand Americans a year," reports the *Journal's* Anna Wilde Matthews, and injure another 1.5 million badly enough to require hospitalization.

Bad blood

Another FDA problem was recently revealed by Sheryl Atkinson of "CBS Evening News." It seems that a patient, Rodney English, died in an Atlanta hospital from a transfusion of mislabeled blood. An FDA investigation found, according to Atkinson, "a

series of errors at the Atlanta Red Cross in blood typing and testing, three other deaths the Red Cross failed to investigate properly and screening problems—donors allowed to give blood even after repeatedly testing positive for illnesses like Hepatitis C." But these facts were deleted from the FDA's public report. One official told Atkinson that the Red Cross had insisted on the deletion and the FDA complied.

Friends in high places

A similar incident happened in the Pentagon. When legal officers at Air Force headquarters heard about unethical practices by First Command Financial Planning, a private company that sells mutual funds to military personnel, they asked military lawyers around the country for reports of "unethical or overly aggressive" sales tactics. They also expressed concern about excessive fees charged by the mutual funds—fees so high as to consume half of the investors' first-year investment. Within three weeks, this investigation was quashed. First Command complained, and it turned out to have friends at the top. The result, according to Anna B. Henriques of *The New York Times*:

"The Air Force issued a retraction, which it had allowed the company to edit. It gave the com-

PRETTY IN PINK

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pany a letter, signed by the Air Force's top legal officer, after letting the company edit that, too."

Leaving plenty of children behind

I assume that George W. Bush, like most members of his administration, is a faithful reader of the conservative *Washington Times*. If so, I hope his modest curiosity managed to get him to page 12 of the August 30 edition, so that he could see what has happened to his No Child Left Behind program. There he would have found this headline: "Twelve million languish in failing public schools, report says." The accompanying article cites this conclusion from the Education Commission of the States: At least one-quarter of the nation's public schools fail to meet "adequate yearly progress" standards under the No Child Left Behind act. And, as even those right-wingers at the *Times* must acknowledge, "these schools predominantly served minority and economically disadvantaged students."

What's more, the words "at least" were used because only 19 states have turned in complete progress reports. "Thirty-one states and the District [of Columbia] have provided only partial reports." So the situation is probably much worse than even the already-dire-enough headline suggests.

The wrong way home

One reason the District is lagging can be found in a recent report about the local education office by D.C. auditor Deborah K. Nichols, who found that "certain employees are able to manipulate the system to obtain reimbursement for questionable travel... of a personal or self-serving nature rather than the performance of

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official business." One trip questioned was a two-night stay by five employees in Richmond where the sole work done was attending a meeting that concluded at 1 p.m. on the first day. Richmond is 90 miles from Washington. One receipt submitted for the trip was from a gas station in North Carolina—a state which, for those who slept through geography class, is definitely not located between Washington and Richmond. But at least in this case, an itemized expense report was made. Such reports, according to Jim McElhatton of *The Washington Times*, "were not submitted for 89% of the trips taken by [education] officials."

The un-American generation

Why do conservatives think the future belongs to them? Their power behind the throne in Washington, Grover Norquist, recently explained to the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*:

"We've had four more years pass where the age cohort that is most Democratic and most pro-statist, are those people who turned 21 years of age between 1932 and 1952—Great Depression, New Deal, World War II, Social Security, the draft—all that stuff.

That age cohort is now between the ages of seventy and ninety years old. And every year, two million of them die. ... This is an age cohort that voted for a draft before the war started and allowed the draft to continue for twenty-five years after the war was over. Their idea of the legitimate role of the state is radically different from anything previous generations knew, or subsequent generations."

If you doubt that Norquist would have really said this, I hasten to add that these words are taken from the conservative *Weekly Standard*, which, after *Slate* and *The New Republic* had published translations from *El Mundo* of Norquist's remarks, and distrusting those accounts for obvious reasons, acquired an actual tape of the statement. Norquist went on to describe what others have called the Greatest Generation as "very un-American."

From everything I know about Norquist and conservatives of his ilk, they really do hate the idea of government help for the needy, whose misfortune they attribute to defects of character while their own prosperity has nothing to do with the government subsidies they have been able to wangle, the taxes they have managed to evade, or the silver spoon that was often theirs at birth, but is solely attributable to their own talent and hard work. Most of all, they hate the thought that their sons and daughters might be required to share the burden of defending this country instead of being able to hire the less-fortunate as substitutes. After all, they have, as Dick Cheney puts it, "other priorities."

Bush's brain

Speaking of Norquist reminds me of his best buddy, Karl Rove. Did you see our alumnus Joshua

Green's article about Rove in the November *Atlantic*? He points out "Rove's signature tactic is to attack an opponent on the very front that seems unassailable." Mark Kennedy, an opponent of Rove's candidate in an Alabama election, had as a family court judge become dedicated to helping abused children. His devotion to the cause was sufficiently impressive that he was made president of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. Proud of his record, his campaign broadcast one commercial showing him holding hands with children. "Trying to counter the positives from that ad," a Rove staffer explained to Green, a whispering campaign was launched alleging that Kennedy was a pedophile. Recognize a pattern?

Boudoir boutiques

Women's sex toys are "making their way into sophisticated boutiques," reports Ruth La Ferla in *The New York Times*. One is located at 69th and Madison Avenue, just across the street from Cartier in a very ritzy part of Manhattan. "When our homes and bathrooms have become temples of design and status-seeking, and when people upscale their sheets and their toilets and their toothbrushes, should we be surprised that they upscale their sex toy too?" comments Juliet Schor, an economist and sociologist.

Next, I'm sure we're going to see vibrators by Prada, and dildos by Dior. But if you're impecunious, don't despair. In not too long, there are sure to be cheap knockoffs on street corners everywhere.

A few good men

In West Virginia, only one in four former welfare recipients whose benefits had expired have

found jobs, according to a study by West Virginia University reported by the *Charleston Gazette's* Scott Finn. More than half of those jobs are part-time. The average former welfare family is earning \$6,120 a year. National figures show that although the number of people on welfare declined by 149,000 from Dec. 31, 2002, to Dec. 31, 2003, the number in poverty rose by 1.3 million.

There is no question that welfare reform has succeeded in getting people off the rolls, and, unlike in West Virginia, in many places there are jobs available, albeit mostly low-paying ones. But even with jobs, according to Jason DeParle's important new book *American Dream*, too many of the lives of former recipients remain chaotic. DeParle shows how agonizingly difficult life is with worn-out cars breaking down, utilities being cut off, children crying for attention, health care maddeningly difficult to obtain, neighborhoods depressingly bleak, and wages so low that barely scraping by seems like an impossible dream.

The biggest thing missing in the lives of these women is reliable men. DeParle believes that our most important unacknowledged social problem is finding effective ways to both help and challenge inner-city men to overcome the patterns of self-destructive and irresponsible behavior in which society's prejudices and their own attitudes now trap them.

My own kids are at Georgetown Day

More evidence that a lot is left to do if No Child is to be Left Behind comes from Bush's fans at *The Washington Times*, so it should not be subject to the administration's usual disdain for reports from what it regards as the liberal

The Washington Monthly's Monthly Journalism Award

**Donald L. Bartlett and
James B. Steele**

"Who Left the Door Open?"

Time

Sept. 20, 2004

Bartlett and Steele, perhaps the pre-eminent team of investigative journalists working today, have produced a stunning, comprehensive account of the federal government's failures to secure our border with Mexico since September 11. The reassignment of Border Patrolmen has meant that the number of immigrants creeping across the Rio Grande has grown each year since 2001. This year, more than 3 million illegals will cross, including roughly 60,000 from places other than Mexico; federal agents have picked up border-crossers who hail from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. Bartlett and Steele are particularly devastating in detailing the ways in which the immigrants overwhelm border towns, and the deceitful policy dance Washington plays: "Mexico sends its poor north to take jobs illegally, and the U.S. arrests enough of the border crossers to create the illusion that it is enforcing the immigration laws while allowing the great majority to get through."

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to one or more newspaper, magazine, radio, or television stories (or series of stories) that demonstrate a commitment to the public interest. We are particularly interested in reporting that explains the successes and failures of government agencies at all levels and of other institutions such as the media, corporations, unions, and foundations that contribute to the existence or solution of public problems. Please send nominations (including a copy of the article or broadcast text) to The Washington Monthly Journalism Award, 733 15th Street, NW, Suite 520, Washington, DC 20005. Or email us at editors@washingtonmonthly.com.

media. The *Times* article is based on a study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute that finds that, in many large cities, a high percentage of public school teachers send their own children to private schools: 44 percent in Philadelphia, 41 in Cincinnati, 39 in Chicago, 35 in Baltimore, 33 in New York, and 28 in Washington, D.C.

The *Times* uses these figures to make the case for vouchers. And I favor vouchers as a short-term solution for poor parents whose children are trapped in terrible school systems. But it seems to me the main point of the figures is to show the need for major reform of public education in these large cities and everywhere else the public schools are in a bad way. To me, the tragedy of George W. Bush's presidency is that he won the 2000 election with No Child Left Behind but proceeded to leave the program behind as he became obsessed with Iraq.

Fannie Mae's Ken Lays

Who benefited from the accounting shenanigans at Fannie Mae? Consider \$400 million that should have been charged as expense in 1998. Unfortunately, it would have reduced bonuses due present and former CEOs Franklin Raines and James Johnson, so Fannie Mae's bookkeepers moved \$200 million in expenses to another year. Voila! Raines and Johnson collected their bonuses "undiminished," as Gretchen Morgenson of *The New York Times* put it, by proper accounting.

But it's such a boring task

You have probably read about the FBI's failure to translate thousands of hours of wiretap recordings from counterintelligence and counterterrorism investigations. 123,000 of these hours are, according to an audit by the Inspector General of the Department of Justice, Glenn Fine, "in languages

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primarily related to counter-terrorism activities," including Arabic. What you may not know is that this problem is not something that only became clear after 9/11. In fact, the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 might have been prevented if the FBI had been doing timely translations of its wiretaps. Evidence of the plotting of that event from as early as 1990 was on wiretaps not translated until after the bombing.

Why not wear a sign?

We've told you how air marshals have to follow a dress code that can make them easily identifiable. Now, from Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar of the *Los Angeles Times*, comes news of another way they are required to identify themselves by their employer, the Department of Homeland Security. When they check in at the hotels they are required to use because the department has negotiated special rates, they must ask for the "air marshal discount." This may not seem a major threat to national security, but if I were an al Qaeda recruiter, I'd make a point of befriending desk clerks.

Kinsey's beatnik

The recent revelations about Alfred Kinsey's sex life have

raised some questions about the reliability of the research upon which Kinsey's landmark books were based. I know nothing about Kinsey's sex life, but I do know a bit about his research.

One of my friends during my college days at Columbia was Allen Ginsberg. He introduced me to a friend of his named Herbert Huncke, who had been a source and a recruiter for Kinsey. Herbert was a junkie who supported himself and his habit by petty larceny. Kinsey gave him \$10 for the interview and \$2 a head for each recruit. I've always thought that the word "beat" was first used by Allen to describe Herbert. He looked defeated—terribly thin, almost ghostly in appearance. He moved with stealth—"like an Arab," Jack Kerouac wrote. I saw him fairly frequently for a couple of years, but usually only when he was trying to sell me something that I was confident he had not acquired by legal means. Although he later developed genuine talent as a writer, and earned a three-column obituary in *The New York Times*, at that time I would not have trusted him around the corner or anywhere else for that matter.

He was the kind of fellow whom I suspect would have told Kinsey anything that would titillate and, even if he was telling the truth, would have described a sex life, that was, to put it as gently as possible, atypical. Herbert called his autobiography *Guilty of Everything*.

Although Kinsey may have found a representative sample elsewhere, he definitely did not find it at the place Herbert did his recruiting. It was the Automat on 42nd Street between 7th and 8th Avenue, which was patronized almost exclusively by minor criminals—thieves, con men, pimps, prostitutes of both sexes—and major league substance abusers.

10 MILES SQUARE

"...such district (not exceeding ten miles square)...[shall] become the seat of the government of the United States"

—THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

Writers' Block

What will Bush-bashing book authors do if Kerry wins?

By Matthew Quirk

Jack Huberman doesn't seem particularly mad as he reads *The New York Times* on his laptop. He doesn't grumble or cringe, or ball his fists. As his tongue snatches a small crumb of toasted English muffin from his top lip, he looks the way any other trim, middle-aged man of average height with retreating gray hair would look while catching up on the news and checking his email on a Sunday afternoon. But Jack is full of hate. It's his job.

"Surge in Iraqi violence results in overflowing morgues," he says, checking the headlines. "That's a good one." When Huberman finds something in the paper that makes him hate George W. Bush, which is often, he copies it into a Microsoft Word document, organized by alphabetical headings (Campaign Finance Reform; Cheney and Halliburton; Chicken hawks), and formats it according to an elaborate system. For every tidbit excerpted, the chief reason to hate Bush is put in bold type, while secondary reasons are underlined. Copied text goes in

11-point font; editorial comments from Huberman in 12-point. Everything else is cut, with deletions indicated by ellipses. Occasionally, Bush elicits so much hate on a given subject that Huberman is forced to make adjustments. At one point this summer, for instance, he noticed the file was getting very front-heavy, owing to a strong performance by the president in the "Iraq" category. "The mid-point was about F," notes Huberman. "So I had to break War Profiteering out from Iraq as a separate section."

So goes work on the potential sec-

ond volume of *The Bush-Haters Handbook: A Guide to the Most Appalling President of the Past 100 Years*. (The first volume, which came out last December, is currently in its fifth printing.) So far, volume two is 432-pages long. Every entry still needs to be trimmed and condensed into



Liberal authors love to hate 'em