

A Culture of Secrecy

What has Happened to the Principle that American Democracy Should be Accessible and Transparent?

by Charles Lewis

"Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

—George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

In the world's oldest democracy, pressure on investigative journalists is usually exerted in sophisticated, non-lethal ways, under the public radar. Every day in Washington, D.C., thousands of government and corporate public relations flaks and lobbyists purvey their "talking points" with a friendly smile, no matter how odious the client, no matter how intellectually dishonest or morally dubious their message. Journalists must trudge through the shameless "spin"-that vanilla word admirably used these days instead of "lying," which has a harshly judgmental, jarringly rude ring in Washington power circles.

Sometimes the persuasion becomes less subtle. For example, when the Center for Public Integrity obtained and prepared to publish online the secret, proposed draft sequel to the USA Patriot Act, known as "Patriot II," we got calls from the U.S. Justice Department beseeching us **not** to publish.

Over the years, those unhappy with my investigations have tried just about everything to discourage our work. They have issued subpoenas, stalked my hotel room, escorted me off military bases, threatened physical arrest, suggested I leave via a second-story window, made a death threat personally communicated by concerned state troopers who asked that we leave the area immediately (we didn't), hired public relations people to infiltrate my news conferences and pose as "reporters" to ask distracting questions, attempted to pressure the Center's donors, and even brought expensive, frivolous libel litigation that takes years and costs millions of dollars to defend.

Being despised and frozen out by those in power is an occupational hazard—indeed, a badge of honor—for investigative reporters everywhere. Certainly no one at the nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity harbors any illusions that he or she will ever be invited to dinner at the White House. This is hardly surprising given that the Center broke the Clinton White House "Lincoln Bedroom" fundraising scandal, first revealed that Enron was George W. Bush's top career patron and years later disclosed that Vice President Dick Cheney's former company, Halliburton, is by far the Bush administration's favorite contractor in Iraq. For these impertinent affronts to officialdom, the Center's reports have received 28 awards from respected journalism organizations since 1996.

Public apathy, though, is another matter. Take our 2003 Center report in which we posted and tallied up all of the major U.S. government contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan—a project which won the George Polk Award for online journalism. Center investigators found that nearly every one of the 10 largest contracts awarded for work in Iraq and Afghanistan went to companies employing former high-ranking government officials, and **all** 10 top contractors are established donors in American politics, contributing nearly \$11 million to national political parties, candidates, and political action committees since 1990. And on the eve of the Iraq war, at least nine of the 30 members of the Defense Policy Board, the government-appointed group that advises the Pentagon, had ties to companies that had won more than \$76 billion in defense contracts in 2001 and 2002.

The personal financial disclosure forms of those advisers are secret, and much about the entire contracting process is deliberately hidden, and therefore unknown to the public. For example, it

took 20 researchers, writers, and editors at the Center for Public Integrity six months and 73 Freedom of Information Act requests, including successful litigation in federal court against the Army and State Department, to begin to discern who was getting the Iraq and Afghanistan contracts, and for how much. Why? What has happened to the principles of accessible information and transparency in the decision-making process in our democracy?

True, there is nothing illegal about such cozy, convenient confluences in the mercenary culture of Washington, D.C. But what does it say about the state of our democracy that, beyond some spot news coverage of the Center's findings around the world, there was almost no reaction or interest by Congressional oversight committees, which are controlled by Republicans loath to criticize the Bush administration? Of course, no official reaction means no second day story, no "hook" for the cautious and sometimes deferential national news media, no mounting public awareness or concern, and no political problem. Welcome to business-as-usual Washington.

Undeterred by what we had found, we plunged even deeper, producing a report entitled [Outsourcing the Pentagon](#), in which a team of 23 researchers, writers and editors examined more than 2.2 million Pentagon contract actions totaling \$900 billion spent over six years. This massive nine-month investigative report profiled the 737 largest Defense Department contractors who, including their subsidiaries and affiliates, have received at least \$100 million in contracts. Once again, the Center found, the largest contractors are among the most lavish spenders on political influence. And, most notably, we found that no-bid contracts like the infamous one Halliburton received to do business in Iraq have accounted for more than 40 percent of Pentagon contracting since 1998. That's at least \$362 billion in taxpayer money given to companies without competitive bidding.

Following news coverage of our findings, what was the reaction? Another Washington yawn. There was barely any sign of an official pulse, let alone government investigative interest or, perish the thought, outrage. And yet most Americans assume-and expect-that government contracts are competitively bid, partly because White House, Pentagon and company officials have, year after year, emphasized what they want us to know and, like a circus magician, misdirected our attention away from what would expose them.

A Culture of Lying

Over the years, I have investigated and interviewed members of Congress, presidential candidates, judges, captains of industry, government spooks, labor union presidents, crooks and terrorists, FBI agents and Ku Klux Klansmen, billionaires and the homeless, brilliant thinkers and the mentally deranged. And it is fair to say that I have been lied to by people in virtually **every** part of the United States, in swank marble buildings, smoky bars and dusty local jails, eyeball-to-eyeball and by phone, fax, email and hand-delivered letter, in all kinds of imaginative ways, almost always with a straight face.

The line between truth and falsehood-between the facts and a veneer of verisimilitude-has become so blurred as to be indistinguishable. Increasingly, what the powers that be say has become the publicly perceived reality, simply because they say it is so.

Take the war in Iraq. According to national election polling, a majority of voters for George W. Bush believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, and months earlier, more than half of the nation thought Saddam Hussein and Iraq had close ties to Al Qaeda or were directly involved in the attacks that brought down the World Trade Towers on September 11th. How could **most** Americans be so tragically misinformed, when official U.S. and international government investigations, widely reported by the news media, concluded otherwise?

Between 1999 and mid-2004, there were more than 700 specific utterances by George Bush or Dick Cheney mentioning Iraq, often banging the war drums in ominous tones; interestingly, there was not a single sentence explicitly linking Saddam Hussein to September 11. Instead, that was often slyly implied contextually. At the same time, with some notable exceptions such as Seymour Hersh of *The New Yorker* and Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*, investigative news coverage before March 2003 of the Bush administration's ramp-up to the war in Iraq was underwhelming, to say the least. Daily coverage of government policy pronouncements and rationales was largely uncritical, almost stenographic.

At a time in America's history when discerning the truth is more elusive-and more essential-than ever, the mainstream news media seem increasingly incapable of playing their traditional watchdog role and digging out lies and inaccuracies.

The world of journalism is in a crisis that goes well beyond the spate of recent, highly-publicized scandals involving fraudulent or poorly reported stories. The country has witnessed Sumner Redstone, the chief executive officer of Viacom, home of CBS News and its hallowed legacy of journalistic excellence dating back to Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow, publicly endorse an incumbent President on the eve of a national election-something once considered unimaginable. Over the years CBS and many news organizations have become hollow shells of their former selves, letting go of hundreds of newsroom people and positions in order to achieve ever higher profits and corporate consolidation. The result? Less investigative reporting, reduced scrutiny of those in power and, ultimately, a more easily bamboozled populace.

The inadequate picture of reality that emerges is not limited to politics and government. The fact is, most major news organizations, particularly broadcasters, failed to recognize and report on the business lawlessness of the 1990s, in which literally hundreds of companies-aided and abetted by lawyers, underwriters and accountants-cooked the books and lied to their shareholders and federal authorities. Yes, the media did cover the "perp" walks of CEOs in cuffs at the time of arrest or trial, after the fact. But that's not investigative journalism. Where was the high-profile scrutiny when these companies were deregulated, which enabled their greed, deception and fraud and victimized millions of employees and shareholders?

Nor do the American people get "all the news that's fit to print" when it comes to the political activities of the media corporations themselves. The Center for Public Integrity has been exposing their coziness with our national leaders. News companies claim to objectively cover the President, his administration and Congress, but lavish hundreds of millions of dollars on lobbying and political donations in the hopes of greater deregulation and other favors from them. That included taking Federal Communications Commission officials on 2,500 all-expense-paid trips over an eight-year period.

What does it all mean? For the most part, there is little appetite for investigative journalism. For the "suits" who control what we read, see and hear, besides potentially alienating the political power structure against their own company or industry, thereby possibly jeopardizing millions of dollars in future profits, this edgy enterprise journalism is not efficient or cost-effective. It simply takes too much time, requires too much money and incurs too many legal and other risks. Forget whether or not this is fair or accurate, or relevant given the civic obligation broadcasters and publishers have to the communities they ostensibly serve. It simply is, and it helps to explain why today we have so little independent, critical reporting and why instead we are mostly fed a steady diet of pap from morning to night.

The problem is made worse by the presence of brilliant communications tacticians in the White House who cleverly frame their controversial policy agendas, setting up the class's stenography assignment for the day, with bold, positive names: "No Child Left Behind," the "USA Patriot Act," the "Clear Skies" environmental policy, the "Healthy Forests Initiative." Needless to say, such Orwellian word plays-exacerbated by largely docile, straight news coverage-slip devilishly into

common usage, leaving the public ill-equipped, unprotected and vulnerable to breathtaking, unabashed manipulation.

The Politics of Fear

That seismic date in our history, September 11, 2001, enabled those in power to strengthen the prerogatives of the Presidency in the name of national security, giving rise to a new politics of fear which has severely diminished what the public can know about its government. The Bush administration came to power already overtly hostile to openness and the public's right to know. In its first months, for example, it unsuccessfully attempted to ensconce George W. Bush's gubernatorial documents in his father's presidential library, outside the state's sunshine disclosure laws. The White House has tenaciously and more successfully kept from the American people information about public policy meetings on public property between energy company executives and top federal officials. A respected reporter's home telephone records were secretly seized in order to ascertain his next story and his confidential sources.

Since 9/11, the country has seen a historic, regressive shift in public accountability. Open-records laws nationwide have been rolled back more than 300 times-all in the name of national security. For the first time in U.S. history, the personal papers of past presidents now may only be released with White House approval. A Justice Department "leak" investigation of the White House regarding an Iraq war-related news story has degenerated into a full-fledged witch-hunt against the news media and the First Amendment, with reporters facing imprisonment if they don't reveal their sources.

Against this backdrop, thousands of people have been interrogated by law enforcement officials and hundreds illegally detained-in many cases held for more than three years without any charges filed against them, their right to counsel and court review denied, the customary arrest information withheld. White House and other senior government officials have defended such policies (some of which the U.S. Supreme Court struck down in June), as well as the physical and psychological abuse and torture of foreign prisoners, as essential to the "war on terror," disregarding the Geneva Conventions and continuing to systematically violate human rights.

How far has the national security state mentality gone? Consider the issue of political expression. In China last June, the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the government tightened security in the name of "sound, stable social order," and scores of dissidents (potential protesters who might politically embarrass those in power) were harassed, physically detained and removed from Beijing. The U.S. Government, via the State Department at its daily briefing, expressed its concern "about the harassment, house arrest, detention and any other restrictions . . . We call on the Chinese government to respect the right of the citizens to peacefully express their views."

Yet two months later, at the Republican National Convention in New York, more than 1,800 protesters-predominantly non-violent-were arrested during the days of the convention and kept from public view, some held for 60 hours without seeing a judge, prompting a State Supreme Court judge to order hundreds of them released and finding city authorities in contempt. Civil rights lawyer Norman Siegel said at the time, "We believe the city's plan is to keep protesters detained until George Bush leaves the city tonight." Although Siegel's statement was hotly denied by authorities, the incident nevertheless represented the largest number of dissidents arrested at a political convention in U.S. history, more than Chicago 1968 or Miami 1972. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's explanation: "The city did what it was supposed to do: It protected the streets."

Of course we are not China, where, as *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof recently noted, 42 reporters are in prison, or Russia or Colombia, where according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 29 and 30 reporters, respectively, have been murdered in the past decade.

The situation here is nowhere near as tragic or dire. But more than anytime in recent history, political authorities in the United States are doing many, many things in the name of "protecting the streets," to the ominous detriment of truth in our democracy.

Despite the inhospitable landscape and the grim nature of the work-forensically excavating the cold corpus of unvarnished reality-most investigative reporters would probably grudgingly acknowledge that they are, to paraphrase John Kennedy, "idealists without illusions," with some modicum of hope that things can and should be better than they are.

Hope and perspective are essential, for there is much work to be done.

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