

THE REPUBLICAN NOISE MACHINE



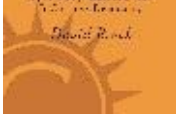
RIGHT-WING MEDIA AND HOW
IT CORRUPTS DEMOCRACY

DAVID BROCK

AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *BLINDED BY THE RIGHT*

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By
D. M. ...
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DAVID BROCK

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**THE
REPUBLICAN
NOISE
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INTRODUCTION

THE REPUBLICAN NOISE MACHINE

SINCE DEFECTING FROM THE REPUBLICAN PARTY in the latter half of the 1990s and publishing a confessional memoir in 2002, I've discussed my right-wing past with politicians, political activists and strategists, academic scholars, student groups, fellow writers, and hundreds of readers of my book *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*. I'm rarely asked anymore why I changed, or about the baroque intricacies of the anti-Clinton movement, which I once participated in and then renounced and exposed. After a presidential election decided by the Supreme Court, the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the war with Iraq, politics has moved to a different place.

Nowadays, when I talk about *Blinded by the Right*, people want to know not how I was blinded by the Right, but how so much of the country seems to be in that position. For the first time since 1928 the Republican Party controls all three branches of government. Fewer people identify with the Democratic Party today than at any time since the New Deal. Conservatism seems the prevailing political and intellectual current, while liberalism seems a fringe dispensation of a few aging professors and Hollywood celebrities. People ask me, a former insider, how the Republican Right has won political and ideological power with such seeming ease and why Democrats, despite winning the most votes in the last three presidential elections, seem to be caught in a downward spiral, still able to win at the ballot box but steadily losing the battle for hearts and minds.

While it is not the only answer, my answer is: It's the media, stupid.

When I say this, in a more respectful way, to folks outside the right wing, I usually get either of two responses. Those who receive their news from the *New York Times* and National Public Radio give me blank stares. They are living in a rarefied media culture—one that prizes accuracy, fairness, and civility—that is no longer representative of the media as a whole. Those who have heard snippets of Rush Limbaugh's radio show, have caught a glimpse of Bill O'Reilly's temper tantrums on the FOX News Channel, or occasionally peruse the editorials in the *Wall Street Journal* think I'm a Cassandra. They view this media as self-discrediting and therefore irrelevant. They are living in a vacuum of denial.

Those who understand what I mean are either members of the media itself, have read media criticism books or Internet sites devoted to the subject, or are in the political trenches every day dealing with the media. The gap between those who recognize right-wing media power for what it is and those who don't is wide and deep, as if they inhabit parallel universes. The gap is dangerous to democracy and needs to be closed.

When I came to Washington fresh out of college in 1986, I got a job at the *Washington Times*, the right-wing newspaper bankrolled by Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Korean-born leader of a religious cult called the Unification Church. Though Moon's paper was said to be read in the Reagan White House, nobody paid much attention to it. We were the proverbial voice in the wilderness. Considering that the paper was governed by a calculatedly unfair political bias and that its journalists

ethics were close to nil, this was a good thing. That was eighteen years ago. Today, the most important sectors of the political media—most of cable TV news, the majority of popular op-ed columns, almost all of talk radio, a substantial chunk of the book market, and many of the most highly trafficked Web sites—reflect more closely the political and journalistic values of the *Washington Times* than those of the *New York Times*.

That is, they are powerful propaganda organs of the Republican Party. For our politics, this development in the media represents a structural change: a structural advantage for the GOP and conservatism, and, I believe, the greatest structural obstacle facing opponents of the right wing. I therefore think it is one of the most important political stories of the era. I have sought to tell this story in *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy*.

I know there is a Republican Noise Machine because I was once part of it. From the *Washington Times*, to a stint as a “research fellow” at the Heritage Foundation (the Right’s premier think tank), to a position as an “investigative writer” at the muckraking magazine *The American Spectator*, and as the author of a best-selling right-wing book, I forwarded the right-wing agenda not as an open political operative or advocate but under the guise of journalism and punditry, fueled by huge sums of money from right-wing billionaires, foundations, and self-interested corporations.

By the time I said good-bye to the right wing in 1997, what was once a voice in the wilderness was drowning out competing voices across all media channels. The most influential political commentators in America, Rush Limbaugh, and his hundreds of imitators saturated every media market in the country, providing 22 percent of Americans—not only conservatives but independent swing voters—with their primary source of news. Conservatives had changed the face of the cable news business with the establishment of the top-rated FOX News Channel, a slicker broadcast version of the Moon in the *Washington Times*. Pundit Ann Coulter and her fanatical ilk topped the best-seller lists, becoming superstars in the world of political punditry. The *Spectator* juggernaut—which had a circulation of three hundred thousand per month at its height in the early 1990s—had been replaced by Internet gossip Matt Drudge, who gets more than 6.5 million visitors to his site every day. Although enormous subsidies were still being pumped into right-wing media that did not turn a profit, right-wing media also had become a multibillion-dollar business, a development that powerfully affected all other commercial media.

The lies, smears, and vicious caricatures leveled against Bill and Hillary Clinton by this right-wing media, and then repeated in virtually every media venue in the country, have now been well documented, not least in *Blinded by the Right*. In that book, I compared the anti-Clinton propaganda to a virus as it seeped off the pages of the *Spectator* into the minds of every sentient American. My memoir ended in 2000; what I did not fully comprehend then, but what is apparent to me now as I have watched the politics of the last few years unfold, is that the virus was not Clinton-specific. In fact, it had nothing to do with the Clintons per se; rather, in different strains, it would afflict any and every political opponent of the right wing, including Al Gore, Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, and the mourners of Senator Paul Wellstone, every major Democrat seeking the presidency in 2000. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, and the liberal advocacy group MoveOn.org. What we have here, as a criminal investigator might say, is a pattern.

In the 2000 presidential campaign, the Republican Noise Machine, which worked for years to convince Americans that the Clintons were criminally minded, used the same techniques of character assassination to turn the Democratic standard-bearer, Al Gore, for many years seen as an over-the-hill earnest Boy Scout, into a liar. When Republican National Committee polling showed that the Republicans would lose the election to the Democrats on the issues, a “skillful and sustained 11-month campaign by Republicans to portray the vice president as flawed and untrustworthy” was adopted, the *New York Times* reported. Republicans accused Gore of saying things he never said—

most infamously, that he “invented” the Internet, a claim he never made that was first attributed to him in a GOP press release before it coursed through the media. Actually, Gore had said, “During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet,” a claim that even

former House Speaker Newt Gingrich verified as true. ¹

The right-wing media broadcast this attack and similar attacks relentlessly, in effect giving the GOP countless hours of free political advertising every day for months leading up to the election. “Albion Barnes Arnold Gore Jr. is a habitual liar,” William Bennett, a Cabinet secretary in the Reagan and first Bush administrations, announced in the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. “. . . Gore lies because he can’t help himself,” neoconservative pamphleteer David Horowitz wrote. “LIAR, LIAR,” screamed Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post*. The conservative columnist George F. Will pointed to Gore’s “serial mendacity” and warned that he is a “dangerous man.” “Gore may be quietly going nuts,” *National Review*’s Byron York concluded. The *Washington Times* agreed: “The real question is how to react to Mr. Gore’s increasingly bizarre utterings. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines ‘delusion’ thusly: ‘The apparent perception, in a nervous or mental disorder, of some thing external that is not actually present . . . a belief in something that is contrary to fact or reality, resulting from deception, misconception, or a mental disorder.’ ”

This impugning of Gore’s character and the questioning of his mental fitness soon surfaced in the regular media. The *New York Times* ran an article headlined TENDENCY TO EMBELLISH FACT SNAGS GORE while the *Boston Globe* weighed in with GORE SEEN AS “MISLEADING.” On ABC’s *This Week*, former Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos referred to Gore’s “Pinocchio problem.” For *National Journal*’s Stuart Taylor, the issue was “the Clintonization of Al Gore, who increasingly apes his boss in fictionalizing his life story and mangling the truth for political gain.” *Washington Post* editor Bob Woodward raised the question of whether Gore “could comprehend reality,” while MSNBC’s Chris Matthews compared Gore to “Zelig” and insisted, “Isn’t it getting to be delusionary?”

The well-orchestrated media cacophony had its intended effect: The election was far more competitive than it should have been—and, indeed, was decided before the Supreme Court stepped in—because of negative voter perceptions of Gore’s honesty and trustworthiness. In the final polls before the election and in exit polls on Election Day, voters said they favored Gore’s program over George W. Bush’s. Gore won substantial majorities not only for his position on most specific issues but also for his overall thrust. The conservative Bush theme of tax cuts and small government was rejected by voters in favor of the more liberal Gore theme of extending prosperity more broadly and standing up to corporate interests. Yet while Bush shaded the truth and misstated facts throughout the campaign on everything from the size of Gore’s federal spending proposals to his own record as governor of Texas, by substantial margins voters thought Bush was more truthful than Gore. According to an ABC exit poll, of personal qualities that mattered most to voters, 24 percent ranked “honest/trustworthy” first—and they went for Bush over Gore by a margin of 80 percent to 15 percent. Seventy-four percent of voters said “Gore would say anything,” while 58 percent thought Bush would. Among white, college-educated, male voters, Gore’s “untruthfulness” was cited overwhelmingly as the reason not to vote for him, far more than any other reason.

Two years after the election, Gore gave an extraordinary interview to the *New York Observer* that could be read as an explanation of what happened to his presidential campaign. Gore charged that conservatives in the media, operating under journalistic cover, are loyal not to the standards and conventions of journalism but, rather, to politics and party. Gore said:

The media is kind of weird these days on politics, and there are some major institutional voices that are, truthfully speaking, part and parcel of the Republican Party. Fox News Network, the *Washington*

Times, Rush Limbaugh—there’s a bunch of them, and some of them are financed by wealthy ultra-conservative billionaires who make political deals with Republican administrations and the rest of the media. . . . Most of the media [has] been slow to recognize the pervasive impact of this Fifth Column in their ranks—that is, day after day, injecting the daily Republican talking points into the definition of what’s objective as stated by the news media as a whole. . . .

Something will start at the Republican National Committee, inside the building, and it will explode the next day on the right-wing talk-show network and on Fox News and in the newspapers that play this game, the *Washington Times* and the others. And then they’ll create a little echo chamber, and pretty soon they all start baiting the mainstream media for allegedly ignoring the story they’ve pushed into the zeitgeist. And then pretty soon the mainstream media goes out and disingenuously takes a so-called objective sampling, and lo and behold, these RNC talking points are woven into the fabric of the zeitgeist. . . .

True to form, the right-wing media greeted this factual description with yet another frenzy of repetitive messaging portraying Gore as crazy. Speaking of Gore on FOX News, *The Weekly Standard*’s Fred Barnes said, “This is nutty. This is along the lines with, you know, President Bush killed Paul Wellstone, and the White House knew before 9/11 that the attacks were going to happen. This is—I mean, this is conspiratorial stuff.” Also on FOX, syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer said of Gore, “I’m a psychiatrist. I don’t usually practice on camera. But this is the edge of looniness, this idea that there’s a vast conspiracy, it sits in a building, it emanates, it has these tentacles, is really at the edge. He could use a little help.” “It could be he’s just nuts,” Rush Limbaugh said of Gore. “Tipper Gore’s issue is what? Mental health. Right? It could be closer to home than we know.” “He [Gore] said it’s a conspiracy,” Tucker Carlson said on CNN’s *Crossfire*. “I actually think he’s coming a little unhinged,” *The Weekly Standard*’s David Brooks, now at the *New York Times*, said of Gore on PBS.

As I write in early 2004, the Republican Noise Machine is primed to run the same campaign of personal vilification in the 2004 presidential election, no matter which Democrat wins the nomination. An op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* by Charles Krauthammer has pronounced former Vermont governor Howard Dean “the Delusional Dean.” Krauthammer’s “diagnosis” rested on a transcript of Dean’s appearance on MSNBC’s *Hardball* with Chris Matthews. Through the use of ellipses

Krauthammer doctored the transcript to make his point. ² As Gore’s experience demonstrates, Democrats ignore these attacks at their peril: Not only do such attacks confirm the preconceptions of Republicans but they shape the thinking of undecided voters and even of Democrats. One of the most frightening experiences I have had in recent years in talking with rank-and-file Democrats is the extent to which they unconsciously internalize right-wing propaganda. To add insult to injury, too many Democrats have a tendency to blame the victims of these smears—their own leaders—rather than addressing the root of the problem. For instance, when Senator Daschle made the factual statement that “failed” diplomacy had led to war with Iraq, right-wing media accused him of siding with Saddam Hussein. The ensuing controversy caused many Democrats to think Daschle had put his foot in his mouth.

With the right-wing media now a seemingly permanent and defining feature of the media landscape, if Democrats cut through the propaganda and win back the White House in 2004, they still face the prospect of being brutally slammed and systematically slandered in such a way that will make governing exceedingly difficult. There should be no doubt that the right-wing media’s wildings of 1993—which led to Clinton’s impeachment four years later—will be replayed over and over again until its capacities to spread filth are somehow eradicated.

Ironically, though not coincidentally, this radical transformation of the media has been obscured by conservative charges of “liberal media bias” that are believed by the vast majority of the public, including about half of Democrats. I’m all too familiar with the claim. From my very first days at the *Washington Times*, I was schooled to invoke “liberal bias” to deflect attention from my own biases and journalistic lapses and as a rationale to justify my presence in the mainstream media conversation in the name of providing “balance” or “the other side.” We sold a lot of books and magazines and commanded lavish attention for our propaganda outside the right wing by using this cover story. As showed in *Blinded by the Right*, the truth was that my work as a right-wing journalist and commentator—in particular, my *American Spectator* exposés on Anita Hill and the Clintons—did not deserve the attention they received. I was delivering a truckload of nonfacts, half-truths, and innuendos, not “balance” or “the other side.” What I show in *The Republican Noise Machine* is that my experience was not the exception but the rule.

The “liberal media” mantra aside, if one looks and listens closely to what the right wing says when it thinks others may not be paying attention, there should be no doubt that it has made potent political gains not despite the media but *through* it. Rush Limbaugh says his program has “redefined the media” and refers to the “Limbaugh echo chamber syndrome,” by which messaging originating on his show drives the twenty-four-hour news cycle. “The radical Left,” he says, “is furious that liberals no longer set the agenda in the national media.” ‘NEW MEDIA’ OUTLETS POUND ESTABLISHMENT, the *Washington Times* announced in an op-ed by right-wing publicist Craig Shirley. In a column explaining why the “outing” in the press of the identity of a covert CIA operative by senior Bush administration officials—a possibly criminal act committed to harm a Bush critic—did not spark a major political scandal, Tod Lindberg of the Hoover Institution explained in the *Washington Times*: “The media culture has changed. Conservatives and GOP partisans now have more than adequate means to offer an exculpatory counter-narrative.” When CBS announced the cancellation of a biography that was deemed unflattering toward the Reagans, Matt Drudge appeared on MSNBC, on a show hosted by a former Republican member of Congress, to announce the “beginning of a second media century. . . . It was the Internet, it was talk radio, it was cable that put pressure on CBS, and heretofore there’s never been this kind of pressure applied to one of the big titans, one of the big three.” Brian G. Anderson, writing on OpinionJournal.com, a right-wing Web site published by the Wall Street Journal, in late 2003, informed conservatives, “[w]e’re not losing anymore” and attributed this fact to a media “revolution.” “Everything has changed,” he wrote.

In a syndicated column titled “Culture War Signals,” John Leo of *U.S. News & World Report* argued that “a corner has been turned” in the “culture wars” with the “rise of a large crop of commentators on the left has not been able to match” and “conservative gains in new media” like the FOX News Channel. Conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has written that the conservative media have “cohered to form a dazzlingly efficient ideology delivery system that swamps liberal efforts to get their ideas out.” MSNBC’s Matthews, interviewing Bernard Goldberg, the author of an attack book on the “liberal media” titled *Bias*, got the author to agree with his view that the cable news industry—whose total news audience is growing while that of the traditional broadcast news network is declining—is biased all right, though in favor of the right wing. According to Bill O’Reilly, “For decades, [liberals] controlled the agenda on TV news. That’s over.” In an interview with PBS, Tom Blankley, the former Newt Gingrich flack turned editorial page editor of the *Washington Times* and *McLaughlin Group* panelist, said:

Starting in 1994, with the Republican election of Congress, I think Limbaugh made the difference in electing the Republican majority. In the following three elections, he made the difference holding the majority. And in 2000, in the presidential race in Florida, he was the difference between Gore and

Bush winning Florida, and thus the presidency.

Commenting on the media while interviewing Ann Coulter about her book *Treason: Liberty and Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*, right-wing radio host Sean Hannity crowed, “We’ve basically taken over!” Coulter, who has made millions off the charge of “liberal media bias,” while maintaining a career as perhaps the most biased right-wing voice in the media, laughed in agreement. A young writer for Rupert Murdoch’s neoconservative *Weekly Standard* named Matt Labash—whom I hired into right-wing journalism at *The American Spectator*—was probably laughing too, when he was interviewed by *Columbia Journalism Review* partner Web site JournalismJobs.com. The interviewer asked, “Why have conservative media outlets like *The Weekly Standard* and FOX News Channel become more popular in recent years?” In his answer, Labash conceded that conservatives reject in their own media the standards of fairness, accuracy, and unbiased coverage that they demand from the “liberal media.” He unmasked the hypocrisy at the heart of these endeavors:

Because they feed the rage. We bring pain to the liberal media. I say that mockingly but it’s true, somewhat. . . . While these hand-wringing Freedom Forum types talk about objectivity, the conservative media like to rap the liberal media on the knuckles for not being objective. We’ve created this cottage industry in which it pays to be un-objective. . . . It’s a great way to have your cake and eat it too. Criticize other people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It’s a great little racket.

Matt Labash’s “great little racket” is the subject of *The Republican Noise Machine*. This is a book about the explicitly right-wing media and about how mainstream media, sometimes under the direction of executives who are conservative Republicans, has succumbed to an undue conservative influence and tilt. It is about the right-wing media’s history, its reach, its appeal, its practices, its methods, and its financing. It is also about the beliefs of those who populate right-wing media and the beliefs that people derive from it. My conclusion is that right-wing media is a massive fraud victimizing its own audience and corrupting the broader political dialogue with the tacit permission of established media authorities who should, and probably do, know better.

I argue, moreover, that the creation of right-wing media, and of the strategies by which the right wing has penetrated, pressured, co-opted, and subdued the mainstream media into accommodating conservatism, was not an accident. Once upon a time, right-wing strategists, operatives, and financiers believed that they could never win political hegemony in the United States unless they won the domination of the country’s political discourse. Toward this end, a deliberate, well-financed, and expressly acknowledged communications and deregulatory plan was pursued by the right wing for more than thirty years—in close coordination with Republican Party leaders—to subvert and subsume journalism and reshape the national consciousness through the media, with the intention of skewing American politics sharply to the right. The plan has succeeded spectacularly.

The implications of this right-wing media incursion extend well beyond particular political outcomes to the heart of our democracy. Democracy depends on an informed citizenry. The conscious effort by the right wing to misinform the American citizenry—to collapse the distinction between journalism and propaganda—is thus an assault on democracy itself.

The problem is really not so much one of “bias,” to use the Right’s favored terminology, as it is one where bias leads: In the biased right-wing media, among biased right-wing commentators, and in the mainstream media susceptible to right-wing scripting, it leads to verifiable journalistic malpractice, the publication of misinformation, and to ethical malfeasance. At a deeper level, the existence and influence of the right-wing media as presently constituted is an affront to logic, rationality, and the

maintenance of a shared knowledge base from which political consensus and correct public policy choices can be forged.

While the right wing cleverly has achieved its greatest gains in mainstream media sectors that ostensibly present opinion—columns, TV punditry, talk radio, and books—this opinion is predicated on a raft of distortions, misrepresentations, and outright lies presented to readers and viewers as fact. To further confuse the picture, the right wing has funded an array of its own media institutions, including newspapers, magazines, Internet sites, and a cable news channel, that produce a large volume of “news” that is not only offensive and unfair but misleading and often false.

Because technological advances and the race for ratings and sales have made the wall between right-wing media and the rest of the media permeable, the American media as a whole has become a powerful conveyor belt for conservative-generated “news,” commentary, story lines, jargon, and spin. It is now possible to watch a lie move from a disreputable right-wing Web site onto the afternoon talk radio shows, to several cable chat shows throughout the evening, and into the next morning’s *Washington Post*—all in twenty-four hours. This media food chain moves phony information and GOP talking points—manufactured by and for conservatives, often bought and paid for by conservative political interests, and disseminated through an unabashedly biased right-wing media apparatus that follows no rules or professional norms—into every family dining room, every workplace, and even every Internet chat room in America.

Equally troubling is that the cable and radio talkers who shape the national political conversation have the ability to censor news that does not serve the interests of the right wing. Every day professional news organizations, primarily in the prestige print press, report facts, across a broad range of subjects, that are essential to an informed view of politics and policy. More often than not these stories die on the page and never reach most Americans, owing to right-wing command of the new media “echo chamber.”

The right-wing drive for media power must also be understood as an overturning of the First Amendment, which posits that good information will drive out bad information given diversity in the marketplace of ideas. As I will show, the Right’s premeditated undermining of the media as a public trust in favor of crass commercial values, its coordinated attacks on noncommercial media, and the Republican-led drive for greater consolidation of media ownership have all but wiped out liberal and left-wing views and voices in entire sectors of the American media. Perhaps most ominous, right-wing verbal brownshirts of late have used their mighty media platforms to chill the free speech of their political adversaries and to neuter aggressive journalistic fact-finding that threatens Republican power.

My view is that unchecked right-wing media power means that in the United States today, no issue can be honestly debated and no election can be fairly decided. If California voters recall the governor in the belief that the state budget deficit is four times higher than it actually is, if Americans think Saddam Hussein was behind September 11 before hearing any evidence, if 19 percent of the public thinks it is in the top 1 percent tax bracket, if Americans view criticism of the government’s national security policies as tantamount to treason—thank the right-wing media and those who abet it.

I feel it necessary to write a few words about what I am not trying to accomplish in this book. The right wing has spent so many years and so many millions of dollars framing the debate about the politics of the media that this book will inevitably be seen as an attempt to refute charges of “liberal media bias,” as if there were no other issue worth discussing. I do address the subject of “liberal bias” in the mainstream media, and how it came to be such a bugaboo, in chapters 1 and 3. While instances of liberal bias—and instances of conservative bias—do exist, I show by examining the available evidence that right-wing claims of systematic liberal bias in the news have never been substantiated. However, as it is a fool’s errand to attempt to prove a negative, this book should not be judged on

point that is a distraction from the real matter at hand. The existence of a powerful right-wing media is an incontrovertible fact and a subject fit for examination, quite aside from one's view on the "bias" debate.

It does seem to me a matter of common sense that if the professional media did not do what it is the business of doing—reporting facts and providing information—it would either have had to change its practices long ago or go broke. Certainly, if CBS News anchor Dan Rather committed the type of willful journalistic malpractice committed night after night by FOX's Bill O'Reilly, who presents his show as a "No Spin Zone," Rather would be out of a job forthwith. That said, I realize that much bias is in the eye of the beholder, and those who see what they see—on either side of the ideological divide—may never be convinced otherwise. In fact, I have concluded that right-wingers have purposely chosen to make an issue of bias—rather than make their case on the more objective grounds of factual inaccuracy or a breach of standards or ethics—precisely because, as long as there are consumers of news who share the biases of the right-wing media critics, they know that they can never be proved wrong.

This book does not offer a critique of news coverage that is presented as objective and impartial. Unlike conservatives who, willy-nilly, make conspiratorial allegations of bias against professional news organizations, I do not issue the blanket indictment that mainstream news organizations, editors, or reporters secretly harbor conservative biases, nor do I claim they intentionally skew the news to serve conservative ideological ends. This does not mean that there are no instances of conservative bias in news reports, only that I have not sought to document them here. My general feeling and experience has been that ideological bias of any type is the least of the biases prevalent in professional news organizations.

Bias, moreover, is a state of mind. Since, as a general rule, news professionals discuss neither their political views nor the thought processes that go into making the news, charges of personal bias, whichever direction, require a gift for mind reading that neither I nor the right-wing media critics possess. And with no team of researchers at my disposal to do empirical studies of verifiable patterns in news content, I did not feel it was useful to write a book appraising news coverage that would inevitably be idiosyncratic and, perhaps, more indicative of my own biases than those of the news professionals. (Such studies have been done by credible researchers; where appropriate, I use them in this book.)

Though it is not a subject of this inquiry, I should say that I share the view of many observers that the news coverage of the George W. Bush administration has been less aggressive than circumstances warrant. "Any objective person would say that in some ways Clinton was covered too aggressively in some areas, and Bush is not covered aggressively enough," ABC News political director Mark Halperin told *American Journalism Review* in September 2003. The reasons for this sorry state of affairs run a wide gamut, some of them at least indirectly attributable to right-wing intimidation. In an interview with the BBC, Dan Rather explained, "It is an obscene comparison—you know, I am not sure I like it—but you know there was a time in South Africa that people would put flaming tires around the people's necks if they dissented. And in some ways the fear is that you will be 'necklaced' here, you will have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck. Now it is that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions." A dispatch from Margaret Carlson in *Time* magazine unearthed a more pedestrian concern: "The Cheneys have even dined at the mecca of Georgetown limousine liberals, chez Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn [of the *Washington Post*]. The Cheneys are the most social of the Bushies, asserts Quinn, which she feels accounts for the relatively friendly press coverage the vice president gets. 'It's harder to trash someone you've had pasta with the night before.' "

I also share with many dismay at the generally shallow level of what passes for political

commentary in Washington. However, this is not a book about the state of political punditry overall. ~~Pundits who are not avowedly conservative are not a major part of this story; a few make cameo appearances when right-wing ideology, misinformation, or talking points can be unarguably attributed to them.~~ My purpose here is to examine the authority and weight of the right wing, not to point out examples of pedantry, brownnosing, and idiocy among Washington's chattering classes. The phenomenon, a kind of secondary virus, is not an unimportant subject, but I leave it for another day.

One complaint that I do lodge against the mainstream media and the politically unaligned pundits is their utter failure to expose the right-wing media for the destructive force that it plainly is and to vigilantly police its own ranks against the right-wing raid. Given the amount of ink spilled, and the orgies of self-flagellation, surrounding the cases of serial journalistic fabricators Stephen Glass of *The New Republic* and Jayson Blair of the *New York Times*, I find this laxity curious, to say the least.

As I will show in the pages that follow, there are far more consequential Stephen Glasses and Jayson Blairs on the radio, on television, and in print every day of the week; with the notable exception of a small but hardy band of columnists, authors, and Web loggers, no one says a word about it. The appearance, indulgence, and even celebration of known right-wing dissemblers, extremists, kooks, racists, sexists, homophobes, and anti-Semites in outlets of the mainstream media, including book publishing, is, in my opinion, a disgrace. Some toxic mix of economic and political pressures has caused the guardians of our media to acquiesce in the debasement of our political culture, not to mention of their own integrity and professional standing.

Throughout the narrative, and in the afterword to this book, I briefly describe some new efforts by political opponents of the Right to resist and reduce its influence. Until very recently, progressives appear not to have thought very much about the challenge presented by right-wing media, much less have they done anything to meet it. Today, the questions of whether progressives could or should support a liberal talk radio network, or a liberal FOX News Channel, or a liberal Heritage Foundation, or even a liberal *Drudge Report* are being entertained at a high level by people who are concerned about the malign impact the right-wing media has on American politics. I hope this book will provide further grist for these important conversations and fledgling enterprises.

The issue of my own biases I will address up front. I am an ex-conservative journalist. Having worked closely with them for more than a decade, I hold my former colleagues on the Right in low regard. I have seen, and I know firsthand, indeed from my own pen, how the organized Right has sabotaged not only journalism but also democracy and truth. To stem these ill effects, I believe the current right-wing media ascendancy must be fully understood, exposed, and reversed. It is in this spirit that I offer *The Republican Noise Machine*.

CHAPTER ONE

NIXON'S REVENGE

WHEN JOURNALIST EDITH EFRON died at age seventy-nine in April 2001, Virginia Postrel, the editor of the libertarian magazine *Reason*, for which Efron had been a longtime contributor, published a lengthy remembrance. Postrel celebrated two feature articles Efron had published to wide notice in *Reason* in the 1990s—explorations of the psyches of two famously controversial men she had never met: Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and President Bill Clinton.

While dismissing the sexual harassment laws as an expression of “pure feminist dementia” and ascribing Anita Hill’s sexual harassment charges against Thomas to an “emotional disorder,” Efron sought to attribute Thomas’s own histrionics in his confirmation hearing—he said that he would have rather taken an assassin’s bullet than answer Hill’s charges—to a deep-seated revulsion to the racial

stereotype of “the black man as mythic sexual beast.” ¹ In her article “Can the President Think?” Efron diagnosed Clinton as suffering from “Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder as identified by the American Psychiatric Association” and attention deficit disorder. Clinton, theorized Efron, was “a cognitive cripple,” “incapacitated,” and “helpless,” suggesting that Hillary Clinton literally did not think for him. ²

Postrel also lauded Efron’s 1984 book, *The Apocalyptics: Cancer and the Big Lie*, which charged that the American scientific community, allied with the environmental and consumer movements, had faked a cancer scare as a way of undermining American industry and free enterprise. Although the book was framed as an “impeccably neutral” scientific inquiry, complete with 1,392 footnotes, Efron’s “real thrust,” concluded the editor of Harvard Medical School’s *Health Letter* in a *Washington Post* review, “is political.” Moreover, her antiregulatory tract, conceived as an answer to Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking book on the environment, *Silent Spring*, was “hardly prophetic” and marred by “unfettered and peculiarly violent rhetoric,” “bizarre metaphors,” and “imputation of bad faith.” The mountain of footnotes, he concluded, was largely “gratuitous.” ³

Perhaps not seeing the irony in it, Postrel titled Efron’s obituary “The Woman Who Saw Through the Walls.” ⁴ Oddly, Efron’s first book, *The News Twisters*, a *New York Times* best-seller published in 1971, was mentioned only in passing. Yet it was with this purported exposé of “liberal bias” in network news that Efron, a writer for *TV Guide*—then published by Republican Walter Annenberg, who routinely used his newspaper and magazine empire to advance his political and personal vendettas—made her lasting mark, as the founder of the modern right-wing media criticism industry. *The News Twisters* became its first text. ⁵

After inventing what she claimed was a rigorously objective methodology for detecting bias in the reportage of the three broadcast networks, admittedly derived not from accepted principles of sociology

science but from her own “logic,” and then applying it to coverage during the final seven weeks of the 1968 presidential campaign, Efron concluded that the TV media followed “the elitist-liberal-left line in all controversies”—“actively slanting” their coverage against U.S. policy in Vietnam and for the Vietcong; “actively slanting” against the “white middle-class majority” and in favor of “black militants”; and “actively favoring” the election of Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey over Republican Richard M. Nixon and segregationist independent candidate George Wallace, then governor of Alabama.

A grinning Governor Wallace posed for news photographers holding aloft a copy of *The News Twisters*. At the White House, Richard Nixon, who appointed Walter Annenberg ambassador to Great Britain, was pleased as well. Two years later, testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee revealed that Nixon special counsel Charles Colson took \$8,000 from Nixon’s reelection committee

to purchase copies of *The News Twisters*.⁶ Among a long list of dirty tricks, Colson had been charged with planting phony letters to the editor in newspapers to enhance Nixon’s image and with entertaining a plot to bomb the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank the Nixonites

considered a symbol of the liberal establishment.⁷ During Watergate, Colson was designated to attack news accounts as “a fantasy, a work of fiction,” and he ordered up a “butcher piece” on the

Washington Post staff.⁸

After Nixon’s death in 1994, Colson told the story of *The News Twisters* to *Newsweek*: “[Nixon] called me into his office on another occasion and asked me if I had read Edith Efron’s book about biased network news coverage. I had. I had also concluded that it was a book destined for obscurity. Nixon then ordered me to get it on the best-seller list. I was used to cryptic instructions, but never one quite like this. After finding the particular stores that the *New York Times* and others regularly checked to determine which books were selling, I enlisted the assistance of some Nixon supporters

in New York. We literally bought out the stores.”⁹ When Nixon aide E. Howard Hunt quit the White

House during the Watergate scandal, he left behind several cartons of *The News Twisters*.¹⁰

Edith Efron was a self-described libertarian and a onetime devotee of Ayn Rand, who advocated free-market fundamentalism and dismantling of the welfare state in her theory of objectivism. Efron believed that “historically . . . liberals . . . have always followed the ideological leadership of the revolutionary left. . . .” Her research was underwritten by a grant from the Historical Research Foundation, established with a bequest from conservative lace importer Alfred Kohlberg. According to a report in *Variety* at the time, Kohlberg was “a close associate of Senator Joe McCarthy, [who] earned the label as ‘head’ of the so-called China Lobby for his work for Chiang Kai-shek,” the authoritarian leader of the Nationalist Chinese government. The institute’s “projects chairman” was *National Review* founder William F. Buckley Jr. Buckley hyped *The News Twisters* as “explosive,” as did Irving Kristol, godfather of the ideological movement known as neoconservatism, in an essay in *Fortune*. Kristol’s magazine, *The Public Interest*, and a second neoconservative organ, *Commentary* (under the editorship of Norman Podhoretz), heaped early praise on the book.

Hitting the best-seller list thanks to Nixon’s slush fund, the book broke through in the wider media where its methods did not survive scrutiny from nonconservatives. It was no coincidence that Efron, whose work over the years betrayed a fascination with the psychological phenomenon of projection, called her tome *The News Twisters*. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorialized, “The book is a genuine study of TV news performance, but a 1972 campaign document designed to twist network coverage to the right,” while the *New York Post* labeled it “right-angled paranoia.” Writing in the

Washington Post, Ben H. Bagdikian called the book “dishonest, inaccurate . . . [a] demonstration of how to doctor evidence.”

The reviewers’ criticism focused on the fact that Efron’s method—taping every broadcast during the period studied and marking the transcripts for “pro” or “anti” bias—was not objective but subjective. Reviewers noted that in Efron’s idiosyncratic world, a report on Nixon being met by college hecklers was an example of anti-Nixon bias, while a report on Humphrey being met by college hecklers was listed not as an example of anti-Humphrey bias but as liberal bias: “reporter supporting demonstrators.” Nor could she explain how her own data tables contradicted her sweeping conclusions, as when she counted the words spoken for and against liberals on the three networks combined and found 20 percent for liberals and 80 percent against.

When CBS News took the extraordinary step of hiring a research firm to do an analysis of the broadcasts Efron cited, it found that she grossly misrepresented the plain meaning of the transcripts. One CBS script that read, “Nixon says he is warning his staff against overconfidence, but he himself hardly looks worried,” was listed by Efron as an “anti-Nixon editorial” that “says Nixon is overconfident; suggests he is a liar.” Countering Efron’s claim that CBS aired sixteen times the amount of anti-Nixon material as pro-Nixon material, the CBS-commissioned study found that 60 percent of all references to Nixon on CBS were neutral, with the favorable and unfavorable references about evenly divided. [11](#)

In providing a template for what would become a well-organized and well-funded campaign by the political Right to bring the media under its ideological domination, *The News Twisters* was notable not only for the transparent flaws of its central arguments but also for its imperviousness to the documentation of those flaws. Efron was not the first conservative author to show that a combination of polemical skills, good timing, and a flair for publicity could carry the day, though she was a pioneer of the technique. A political ideologue, writing for an audience of true believers, could impute to her or her critics a political motive and survive, the facts notwithstanding. This was especially the case of the subject of media bias, in which criticism by the press could be made to look like further proof of the original indictment.

Unbowed and unbound, Efron managed to take her one-woman show before a Senate subcommittee hearing on government regulation of the broadcast industry arranged by President Nixon. She then published a second book, a detailed rebuttal of the CBS report on *The News Twisters*, under the self-dramatizing title *How CBS Tried to Kill a Book*. Had that been the intention of CBS executives, who did not publish their study until six months after Efron’s book had become a best-seller, they failed. *The News Twisters* validated abeyant right-wing frustration with the media that dated back to the era when the anti-Communist witch-hunter Joseph McCarthy, whose meteoric rise to power in the Senate was due in part to his talents as a demagogic media manipulator, was exposed as a smear artist by Edward R. Murrow in his CBS documentary series *See It Now*. McCarthy fought back with attacks on Murrow’s patriotism, and CBS gave the senator time to air a rebuttal, written by conservative columnist George Sokolsky of the William Randolph Hearst newspaper chain. McCarthy’s career, however, did not recover. Twenty years later, sustained by funds from a McCarthy sympathizer, Efron’s pseudoscientific claims, and their like, spread like a virus.

The publication of *The News Twisters* in 1971 dovetailed with a political strategy of assaulting and discrediting the journalism profession that had been employed by President Nixon’s administration two years before, when White House speechwriter and former *TV Guide* writer Patrick J. Buchanan approached Nixon with the idea of blunting media reports on Nixon’s Vietnam War policy by attacking the TV networks as biased in favor of the North Vietnamese and the antiwar movement. When he left the White House and published his 1973 book, *The New Majority*, Buchanan revealed

that his recondite concern was more with media power than with bias. Buchanan flatly stated that the power of the TV networks was an obstacle to conservative Republican governance. “The growth of network power, and its adversary posture towards the national government,” he wrote, is “beyond the [American] tradition.”

Buchanan would become a central figure in the Right’s media strategies over the next thirty years, always working inside the two institutions he attacked relentlessly: “Big Government” and the “liberal media.” While plotting his political comeback in 1966, Nixon had hired Buchanan as his sole aide from a job as the youngest editorial writer on a major U.S. newspaper, the ultraconservative *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, where Buchanan used information fed to the publisher, Richard Amberg, by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to smear civil rights leaders. [12](#)

Buchanan grew up comfortably in Washington, D.C., the son of a government accountant in a conservative Catholic household where McCarthy and Spanish Fascist Francisco Franco were revered. Buchanan adopted their authoritarian populism and slashing rhetorical style. He was behind the Nixonian strategy of exploiting race to build political support. In a memo to Nixon in 1971, Buchanan wrote that integration could result in “perpetual friction” owing to what he said were hereditary differences in white and black intelligence. As he rose to political prominence in his own right, Buchanan would be accused of anti-Semitism and of “flirting with Fascism” by his conservative brethren when he praised Adolf Hitler, defended Nazi war criminals, and appeared to deny the Holocaust. [13](#)

When he launched his own bids for the presidency in the 1990s, Buchanan staffed his campaign with people tied to white supremacy and militia groups. [14](#)

Though politicians of both parties are frequently unhappy with media coverage, Nixon was in that category all by himself. After growing up lower-middle-class in a small town in Orange County, California, attending Whittier College and Duke University Law School, and then getting rejected for jobs by prominent law firms in the Northeast, Nixon nursed status resentments of what he considered to be East Coast elites. Primary among those elites Nixon resented were journalists. His former aide William Safire wrote in his White House memoir *Before the Fall*:

Nixon, who always knew he had a deep and dark rage within him, mastered his temper in just about every other area, but kept “flicking off the scab,” in his skin-crawling metaphor, when it came to the quintessential “them,” the press. He had contempt for them, as elitist, antidemocratic, lordly, arrogant, lookers-down-their-noses at the elected representative of the folks, and he did everything he could get away with to destroy them—becoming, along the way, elitist, lordly, and dangerously arrogant. [15](#)

Throughout his public life, Nixon believed in his bones that the press was out to avenge his promotion of charges that New Dealer Alger Hiss was a Communist agent and to avenge his slanderous Red-baiting campaign for the California Senate seat against liberal Democrat Helen Gahagan Douglas in 1950—even though the California press, then dominated by conservative Republicanism, was strongly pro-Nixon. [16](#) Nixon’s shifty appearance in a televised presidential debate against Democrat John F. Kennedy in 1960 not only helped seal his loss but also reinforced his fear, and what Safire described as his “hatred,” of the media. After losing the race for California governor in 1962, Nixon quit politics, famously saying, “For sixteen years, ever since the Hiss case you’ve had a lot of fun. Just think what you’re going to be missing. You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference.”

Nixon's retirement lasted six years. By the time he campaigned for the White House in 1968, network news had become a powerful—and, as Nixon saw it, a menacing—medium. Nixon set out to learn how to use tele-vision to his advantage, hiring a team of advertising and TV professionals to “package” him, according to *The Selling of the President, 1968* by Joe McGinniss. Joining the Nixon campaign was Roger Ailes, executive producer of *The Mike Douglas Show*, who had met Nixon at the time of his 1967 guest appearance. Ailes was placed in charge of the so-called Man in the Arena segments, regionally televised specials in which Nixon took questions from a carefully selected studio audience hoping to give “the impression to a viewer that Nixon certainly did have charisma,” according to McGinniss. The campaign paid for the television time, although the events were choreographed to make them appear more like news than advertising.

As his political troubles mounted in the White House, Nixon became further obsessed with subduing and controlling the “media,” a word that the White House insisted on using to describe the press “because [it] had a manipulative Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and the press hated it,” Safire reported. Documents and tapes from his White House years, published by Richard Reeves in his book *President Nixon*, showed a preoccupation “with the type of people who are in the press corps . . . truly a third house supporting the Democratic candidates,” Nixon wrote in a memo to top aide H. R. Haldeman. In April 1971, several months before the release of Efron's book, Nixon wrote Haldeman: “We need the kind of attack which will get to their vulnerable spot—their total support of ultra-liberal causes. . . . Naturally the press has a vested interest in seeing the United States lose the war and they are doing their desperate best to report all the bad news and to downplay the good news. As far as the election is concerned, they will be absolutely vicious and violent on the score. . . . I cannot emphasize too strongly my feeling that much more than any single issue that we are going to emphasize, the discrediting of the press must be our major objective over the next few months.” [17](#)

In early 1972, according to Haldeman's diaries, Nixon met in the White House to discuss reelection strategy with the Reverend Billy Graham, a once-obscure evangelist whose career had been secured by favorable publicity in the publications of William Randolph Hearst and in Henry Luce's *Time* magazine. “Either Communism must die, or Christianity must die,” Graham maintained, as he became a spokesperson for the worldwide anti-Communist crusade and a public supporter of Joe McCarthy. [18](#) Of Nixon's meeting with Graham, Haldeman recorded: “There was considerable discussion of the terrible problem arising from total Jewish domination of the media. . . . Graham has the strong feeling that the Bible says that there are satanic Jews and that's where our problem arises. . . .” [19](#)

Journalists dominated the “enemies list” that Nixon asked his White House counsel, John Dean, to draw up. The telephones of several reporters were wiretapped by the government. And Nixon used telecommunications policy to forward his political aims. During Watergate, Nixon schemed to challenge the *Washington Post*'s broadcast licenses and to convince his supporter Richard Mellon Scaife, an ultraconservative Pittsburgh billionaire, to buy the *Post* outright. [20](#) Network affiliates were harassed. As Safire reported, “When the new White House Office of Telecommunications Policy began making noises at local stations to put heat on their networks to stop ‘ideological plugola,’ that was government intimidation pure and simple.” [21](#)

Nixon and his men had every reason to fear a free and unfettered press corps—and to want to tan-

it. They had a tenuous hold on power, having won office in 1968 with a razor-slim margin of less than

1 percent of the popular vote over Humphrey, who became the Democratic nominee after the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. They were criminally minded, determined to “rat-fuck” their enemies by any means, in their parlance. And though Nixon had won office on a pledge that he would end the war in Vietnam, his plans to escalate it would only inflame antiwar protesters and ensure that the TV media would continue to bring right into America’s living rooms reports of Americans dying in what already looked like a lost cause. Nixon seemed to know instinctively that the media did its job—that it served as an alert government watchdog—his administration could unravel. “Sometimes,” as Safire put it while explaining that Nixon’s hatred of the press wasn’t wholly a product of paranoia, “there can be good reasons for secrecy.”

The corrupt duo of Nixon and his vice president, Spiro T. Agnew, indelibly tarnished the media’s reputation for integrity and professionalism. As reported in Richard Reeves’s *President Nixon*, the device was a speech attacking the East Coast media, drafted by Buchanan, edited by Nixon, and delivered by Agnew on national television in November 1969.

According to Safire, Agnew had his own motives for fearing an autonomous media, which had shown him to be a “bumbler” in the 1968 campaign. Agnew would later tangle with the press over the reporting of his racial slurs and bribery allegations; in the face of a bribery inquiry, he resigned his office and pleaded no contest to federal income tax evasion. But before all that, he relished his role as Nixon’s pit bull.

Spiro Agnew began his speech by condemning the “instant analysis and querulous criticism” by network newsmen following a major Nixon speech on Vietnam during which the president called on “the great silent majority of my fellow Americans” to help him “end the war in a way that we could win the peace.” Agnew excoriated the media for seeking comment on the president’s address from Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks on Vietnam, whom Agnew depicted as a tool of the North Vietnamese. He then blamed the networks for creating a hyped image of the “brutality and violence of merciless police” in the coverage of antiwar protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968—a media event that was thought to have hurt Hubert Humphrey’s candidacy, since it played into Nixon’s law and order themes.

The networks, Agnew suggested, should not air vigorous criticism of government policy, show unflattering images of the police, or be entrusted to cover the news as they saw fit. The network newsmen were reflecting not objective reality in their reportage but, rather, their own distorted view, be they pro-Communist or antipolice. Yet Agnew argued not for neutrality but for the idea that news should reflect the opinions and tastes of the majority of the public, a profoundly antijournalist sentiment.

Agnew described the newsmen as a “small and unelected elite” who “live and work in the geographical and intellectual confines of Washington, D.C., or New York City . . . they talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement to their shared viewpoints. . . . The views of the majority of this fraternity do not—and I repeat not—represent the views of America.” The vice president continued:

The American who relies on television for his news might conclude that the majority of Americans are embittered radicals, that the majority of black Americans feel non-regard for the country, that violence and lawlessness are the rule. . . . In this search for excitement and controversy, has more than equal time gone to the minority of Americans who specialize in attacking the United States—its institutions and its citizens? As with other American institutions, perhaps it is time that the networks were made more responsive to the views of the nation and more responsible to the people.

Agnew's speech was a sensation. COUNTERATTACK ON DISSENT blared the cover of *Time*. Evidently Agnew had tapped into a set of emotions that were already roiling a substantial segment of the public. Many Americans were troubled by the political and social tumult in the country that was beamed to them every night by the evening news, from the assassinations of RFK and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., to race riots, to the antiwar protests. A substantial number of Americans sided with government authorities in these controversies. According to a Harris Poll, Agnew was given credit by 67 percent of the public for "having the courage to speak out against radicals, blacks, and students where others don't dare."

Yet there was little evidence that the public embraced Agnew's critique of the media. A majority of those polled by Harris thought the press was objective and professional, not slanted. It would take years of work by the Republican Right to undermine and subvert journalism by painting it as essentially, an un-American force; but Buchanan had set the process in motion by offering up the East Coast media, the chronicler of unsettling events, as a focus for the public's inchoate concerns, anxieties, and, in some cases, prejudices. Following Agnew's address, East Coast newsrooms reported a flood of hate mail containing words like "eastern snob," "kike," "nigger lover," "homo," "Jew bastard," and "Commie."

Shortly after Agnew's speech, ABC News replaced Frank Reynolds as coanchor of its evening newscast. Reynolds believed he was fired for giving commentaries critical of Nixon. "I paid a price that was taken off the air," he said. ²³ Reynolds's coanchor, Howard K. Smith, who publicly endorsed Agnew's views, was kept on.

Besides chilling the media, the broader political strategy behind the Agnew attack was to build what Buchanan called "the Nixon Counter-Revolution"—a Republican electoral majority—by implicating the media in the racial and cultural tensions of the day. Agnew would go on in future speeches to call the media "pusillanimous pussyfooters," "vicars of vacillation," and "an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals." ²⁴ Casting the media as the enemy of the "silent majority" was also a way of marginalizing liberalism as a narrow ideology foisted on America largely through a series of orchestrated sound bites and camera angles.

According to Safire, the strategy was a ruse: There never was a "silent majority," only a conservative minority, and Nixon and Buchanan both knew it. The fears and divisions in American society that the Nixon White House sought to exploit were real enough; but, as Safire asked Buchanan in a skeptical internal White House memo, "How many people think like he does?" Safire wrote that the "silent majority," a construct invented by what Safire called the "intellectual aristocracy" of the conservative movement, represented only a faction within the GOP.

Nor was there much of a "liberal media." From his partisan perspective in the early 1970s, Safire wrote that 90 percent of the media was "enlightened," not politically biased. Buchanan told journalist Martin Schram following the 1972 election, "I think the media was extraordinarily fair and balanced in this election campaign." ²⁵

In seeking to strike a chord with the "silent majority," it was no accident that Buchanan's attack was tinged with anti-Semitism and nativism. As conservative writer Alan Crawford wrote in his 1980 book, *Thunder on the Right*, revulsion toward the political and cultural institutions of the East Coast, especially those of New York City (which were seen as "cosmopolitan extensions of Europe"), has long been a staple of Far Right populism in the United States. In this view, Crawford explained, the

national networks were simply the newest additions to the list of institutions deserving of suspicion and scorn: the government, both political parties, the universities, the big banks, and the American foreign policy establishment. ²⁶ According to Safire, Buchanan understood that he was appealing to base elements, giving the game away by making private cracks about how “the booboisie in the hinterlands” was energized by Nixon’s attacks on the media.

It is a paradox of its antimedia stance that the conservative movement “aristocracy,” embodied in the future media career of Buchanan, would soon attain media power in its own right. And just as Nixon exemplified the very traits he ascribed to the press, conservatives in the media would do precisely what they claimed liberals did—they used the media to indoctrinate the public into the ideology of their unrepresentative faction.

When Edith Efron began her study in 1968—before Agnew’s 1969 TV rant—she was already working against what she called “a backdrop of simmering public antagonism” toward the press. This antagonism, and thus the still diaphanous notion of media “bias,” had one primary source: conviction among segregationists that the media—which had been somewhat slow to record the civil rights movement until it spilled into the streets as a breaking news story—were sympathetic to the forces of desegregation. In what civil rights reporter Pat Watters called a battle “of the sane against the insane,” there was little if any openly pro-segregationist sentiment in the major American media.

GOP efforts to stoke and harness this antagonism toward the media for political ends began in the 1964 presidential campaign of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, the first movement conservative to be nominated to the presidency and the first Republican to employ the so-called Southern Strategy by appealing to segregationists to win votes that Nixon, on the advice of Buchanan, would later use with much more success. The Republican Right’s Southern Strategy, and its antimedia politics, were born in the same historical moment and reinforced each other.

Barry Goldwater had become a leading conservative spokesman and national political figure because of the press—the same press that had buoyed McCarthy and Nixon. As a young and political inexperienced Senate candidate in 1952, Goldwater’s antigovernment, antiunion, anti-Communist platform attracted the crusading support of the powerful right-wing newspaper publisher Eugene Pulliam, who owned *The Arizona Republic* and the *Phoenix Gazette*. Once in the Senate, his conservative salvos won him favorable notices in the Republican newspapers that dominated major print markets nationwide, from the *Chicago Daily News*, to the *Detroit Free Press*, to the *Dallas Morning News*, to Pulliam’s papers in Indianapolis, to the *Los Angeles Times*. The East Coast press soon followed, as Goldwater found himself featured in the major national magazines—Henry Luce’s *Time*, David Lawrence’s *U.S. News & World Report*, and DeWitt Wallace’s *Reader’s Digest*—and headlines like THE GLITTERING MISTER GOLDWATER. In 1960, Goldwater, who had finished only one year of college, published a ghostwritten book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, which sold more than one million copies. And he began “writing” a thrice-weekly opinion column that was widely syndicated by the *Los Angeles Times*, which had launched Nixon’s career in the 1940s when it was

partisan conservative Republican newspaper under Norman Chandler. ²⁷

In the 1964 presidential race, Goldwater’s glitter wore off. As writer Rick Perlstein details in his Goldwater biography, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, that campaign opened up a political and cultural divide between the Democratic Party and much of the Republican Party on the one side, and on the other Goldwater and his reactionary supporters. The small band of Goldwater militants, who for years had felt alienated, unrepresented, and excluded from the political system, gamed the Republican presidential nominating contest for Goldwater by superior organization. Though their candidate lost many primaries, the Goldwater

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