
The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina is useful as a guide to the “fictional reality” constructed by the Bush administration and the U.S. media in the patriotic fervour that followed the 2001 terrorist attacks and as an exploration of life inside that alternative reality. It also stands as both exhibit and example of a smaller phenomenon that is almost as intriguing: the use of pop culture reference as a shorthand or symbolic language to simplify complex thoughts or descriptions—something that lies at the root of the author’s analysis of the political narrative of the past few years and forms an integral part of his narrative of this narrative. The central thesis of the book is that the U.S. news and entertainment industries have built a culture in which “reality” is something scripted and carefully constructed to adhere to the vision of anyone with the power to manufacture it—“truthiness” is the brilliant term invented for this by TV mock pundit Stephen Colbert. The author argues that the administration of George W. Bush was the first to take office after this culture was “fully on-line, and was brilliant at exploiting it” (p. 225).

Frank Rich is a marquee political commentator for The New York Times and a former theatre critic. In some ways, that makes him eminently qualified for the job of dissecting the current political and media cultures. He knows well the cultural touchstones, devices, and references—that pop culture shorthand—employed by politicians and media to attract and influence the audience, and he brings a critic’s eye to the process of dissecting the years of the Bush administration. This is particularly effective when he dryly exhumes and probes official statements that originally passed without notice through the digestive tract of the news media. For example, he quotes U.S. defence department public relations chief Torie Clarke telling the press that Saddam Hussein had committed decades of “torture and oppression the likes of which I think the world has not seen before” (p. 78).

As Rich points out, “few journalists were going to gainsay the Pentagon mouthpiece by bringing up Hitler and Stalin” (p. 78). Yet even more striking than the historical amnesia of the mainstream media are the roles played by the various imitation and ersatz press. On the one hand, the administration’s PR specialists were planting fake reporters in press conferences to ask the president such softball questions as, “How are you going to work with people who seem to have divorced themselves from reality” (p. 171). On the other hand, there is the fact that the identity of the administration plant was uncovered not by anyone at a newspaper or in a TV news department, but by liberal bloggers, as well as the fact that perhaps the most critical coverage of the administration was coming from a mock news show airing on a comedy network. Anyone wanting a running commentary on the disorienting state of American politics had merely to tune in to The Daily Show and watch Jon Stewart deliver (mostly deadpan) film clips com-
paring what the U.S. administration was saying with what it had said only a few months—or weeks, or days—earlier. Further blurring the lines between fact and fiction, the Bush administration had hired Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer to create a reality TV show centred on the U.S. troops in Afghanistan—while the news media were being held from the battlefield.

Rich has made a valuable contribution in doing in one large project what only a few, such as The Daily Show, did in increments over the tenure of the Bush administration: cataloguing the statements made by U.S. government officials, assembling them as a political narrative, studying the storytellers’ narrative techniques, and then cross-checking it all against reality. As Rich points out in the book’s introduction, the definitive statement may be that of a “presidential aide” who was quoted in The New York Times Magazine as sneering at the “reality based community” of journalists and saying of the administration, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. . . . We’re history’s actors and you . . . all of you, will be left to just study what we do” (p. 3). The arrogance of that statement is as breathtaking as its cultural resonance—especially in light of Rich’s devastating catalogue of the media’s roles as actors in the “Official Story.” One of the things Rich does well is root the Bush narrative in the current U.S. cultural climate, which he describes as a fantasyland in which the “virtual patriotism” of a Bruckheimer action film has come to be confused with the real thing by audience and actors alike. As Rich shows with this well-researched and methodical screed—there are 18 pages of citations and a 78-page timeline—there is much evidence to suggest that the U.S. government has been scripting and directing reality as if it were a Jerry Bruckheimer film.

On the negative side, however, Rich’s antipathy toward George W. Bush and neo-conservatism leads him to indulge in the kind of verbal flourishes and bon mots that add flavour to newspaper columns, but here distract from and weaken a collection of facts that are quite dramatic enough without any verbal assistance. His tendency to get carried away with his own eloquence also tends to numb the reader with overstatement. This is particularly woeful when his attempts to take flight turn to such leaden use of metaphor as “Overplaying the fear card, the president had become the boy who cried wolf” (p. 178).

Rich also has a habit of falling back on film and television references, which sometimes leads into simplistic territory and often makes for passages that may prove incomprehensible to future generations—or even younger current ones. After Hurricane Katrina, the administration “seemed to suffer a breakdown like that of HAL, the computer in 2001” (p. 209). When no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, the subject was dropped “with an alacrity that recalled the ‘Never mind’ with which Gilda Radner’s Emily Litella used to end her misinformed Weekend Update commentaries on Saturday Night Live” (p. 178). A propaganda ploy is described as being like something from The Manchurian Candidate. An administration official resembles “Orson Welles in full noir” (p. 117). Even in quoting another journalist, Rich ends up describing the Iraq war as “the Rashomon of wars” (p. 211)—as if the chronicles of all conflicts were not subject to the individual perceptions of the combatants. The result is a litany of analogies, similes, and metaphors that, as clever as they may be, tend to be infu-
riatingly imprecise—in high contrast with the overall precision of Rich’s research and analysis of U.S. political, entertainment, and media culture.

Still, even in this, Rich highlights an interesting and slightly disturbing possibility: that the blending of reality and fiction, as well as politics and popular culture, may have become so chronic that it is all but impossible for anyone who lives on the media grid to avoid.

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