

Last in the series
Political Media Literacy 104
Not Fair and Balanced

By
Michael Mendizza

Featuring

The Big Lie

A talk by

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

For years I have known that corporate media is censored, cherry picked 'spin.' It is definitely not, as Fox News pounds day after day, 'fare and balanced'. The slogan, fare and balanced, is exactly what Fox is not.

This calculated deception is called double-speak, coined by Orwell in his famous world domination novel "1984." Take, for example, Reagan's pronouncing a 'War on Drugs' while Herbert Walker Bush, then vice president, was selling cocaine to fund illegal contra-terrorists and the shipment of arms to evil-axis nation Iran. Double-speak.

Another form of double speak is to accuse those that oppose what you are doing, of what you are doing. Right wing politicians and their propaganda ministers on talk radio label the other guys as chronic and wasteful tax-raisers. Double speak.

Debt created by government and paid for by ordinary citizens is tax. Bush's Pentagon budget, one third of which is unaccounted for each year, is a tax. The \$700 billion bailout, like the savings and loan scandal before it, is a tax. In the last 20 years it has been the Republicans who have increased the national debt-tax to unprecedented levels - but the propaganda machine keeps pointing the finger at the Democrats.

None of this would be possible with a truly informed population, one that demands and receives fair and balanced news, which we have not had in this country, by design, for over twenty years.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., son of Robert F. Kennedy, nephew of President John F. Kennedy, describes in simple terms how we got here, how long it has been and what it will take to change.

Read it twice and share it with the people you love.

With appreciation,

Michael Mendizza

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

New York City – May 2, 2004

Without integrity in journalism, which is challenging authority, looking into the claims made by government officials and being skeptical, our democracy cannot survive. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

I gave a talk this afternoon at the New York Public Library on the re-issuance of Barry Goldwater's 1955 classic "The Conscience of a Conservative," which I did the introduction for. I did the introduction because when you read this book there's nothing in it that resembles the kind of conservatives they have today. What they have [neo-conservatives] is not conservatism. They pretend to be conservatives but they appoint the conserve out of conservatism.

All the things that traditionally made a conservative, like free market capital, they hate. They want corporate-crony-capitalism. They want capitalism for the poor and socialism for the rich. And separation of church and state, which is one of the conservative pillars, protected by the Constitution. Goldwater was absolutely reverential about the Constitution. But these people have destroyed the Constitution.

We are now torturing people in this country. We are wire tapping our citizens. We've suspended the 820 year old right of Habeas Corpus. [The fundamental instrument for safeguarding individual freedom against arbitrary and lawless state action.] We suspended our protections against search and seizure.

It's the biggest bunch of baloney when they say to us 'oh well, you know, we live in dangerous times!' I had friends who died in the World Trade Center. My office was destroyed in that attack, but objectively, we live in one of the safest times in the history of this planet for Americans.

When I was a little boy we had 15,000 nuclear tipped war heads in Russia pointing at our country, each one able to destroy an entire city. That was a dangerous time but we didn't wire tap our citizens. We didn't torture people then. We didn't suspend Habeas-Corpus. We didn't send people to Guantanamo and do extraordinary renditions to torture people in Syria.

During the Civil War we lost entire cities, 640,000 Americans, not 3,000 - 640,000 were killed. That is the equivalent of six million people being killed today. When they talked about torturing Southerners or mistreating them, Abraham Lincoln drafted a document for how we treat prisoners and it later became the Geneva Convention. He said we are not going to do that as Americans.

When George Washington was confronted with the British torturing American prisoners, keeping them on coffin ships right here in New York Harbor where they were dying by the score every day, during the revolutionary war, Washington said, we're not going to do that. If that's what we're going to do then I'm not going to be part of this conflict.

He passed orders for treating prisoners so well that when he captured Trenton, New Jersey, the Hessians were so astounded by the good treatment that they received from the Americans that they walked all the way from New Jersey to Western Pennsylvania without guards.

During World War II, Dwight Eisenhower again said, no matter what the Nazis do we are not going to torture them. And that is one of the reasons the Germans gave up so quickly, because they knew they were going to be treated well by Americans. All of these things are part of our heritage that Barry Goldwater did his best to celebrate.

Thinking about all this, there are two big failures with democracy, one is, all the corporate money going to our election process, and the second failure is that we have a negligent and indolent press which has simply let down American democracy.

I travel all over the country and hear people talking still about the liberal media. That's what Joseph Goebbels used to call The Big Lie. If you keep saying it and saying it and saying it people begin believing it. There's no liberal media in this country. What do you have? You have The Nation, Mother Jones, Rolling Stone, Pacifica, Air America, and that's pretty much it. But we have a right wing media in this country and if you look around that's where Americans are disproportionately getting their news.

The Pew Foundation did a survey that showed that 30 percent of Americans now say their primary news source is talk radio, which is controlled 90 percent by the right; 22 percent cable news, mainly Fox News, 10 percent Sinclair Network which is the most right wing of all of them.

Sinclair is the largest television network in our country. It's run by a former pornographer who requires all 75 of his local affiliate stations to take a pledge that they will not report critically about this President, about the war in Iraq and a number of other issues. Only 11 percent of Americans read papers where you still can get some relevant news, occasionally. The rest of us get our news primarily from traditional corporate owned media; ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN, which have no ideology except for their own pocketbook.

And that ideology is almost always aligned with the ideology of the party at power, but particularly the Republican Party because they want concessions. These are huge companies. They have all kinds of subsidiaries that are looking for licensing deals, consolidation, concessions from government and they're not going to say something that offends them.

You look at network television. There's no liberal equivalent of John Stossel or Glenn Beck or Robert Novak or Sean Hannity or Bill O'Reilly or any of the other guys.

This devolution of the American press began in 1988 when Ronald Reagan abolished the Fairness Doctrine. We had a rule in this country that was passed in 1928, at the dawn of commercial ratings. It was called the Fairness Doctrine. That rule said that the airways belonged to the public. The broadcasters can be licensed to use them but only with promise that they promote public interest and advance American democracy.

There were three requirements under the Fairness Doctrine. Number one, broadcasters had to air issues of public importance. That's why we have the 6:00 o'clock news hour on the networks. Not because broadcasters wanted it. They wanted to put entertainment in that slot. News departments traditionally lost money. They were forced to do that as part of the Fairness Doctrine. That's why radio stations periodically update the news. It's part of the requirement under the original Fairness Doctrine that they are still doing as a tradition.

Number two, if they were going to give opinion they had to tell both sides. You couldn't have had a Fox News under the Fairness Doctrine. You've couldn't have a Rush Limbaugh. You could have Rush four hours a day but then they would have had to put somebody else on, a counter balancing voice, for the next four hours. You couldn't have Rush and his ditto-heads 24 hours a day on the same station. Rush Limbaugh got started in 1988, the year Reagan abolished the Fairness Doctrine.

Number three, they had to avoid corporate consolidation. Congress wanted to make sure people in Kansas could get crop reports, people in North Dakota could get tornado warnings, people in the South could get country music, that you wouldn't have programming and content dictated by a couple of corporate epicenters in remote areas of the country. And that part of the Fairness Doctrine which was strengthened in 1945 because Congress saw what Hitler and other fascist governments had done in Europe, when they had allowed these corporate consolidations, where they had given contracts and special favors to the media and how they had co-opted the media, got them on their side so that anybody who criticized government policy was either muzzled or branded as un-patriotic. Congress said we can't allow that to happen in this country. So they strengthened that part of the Fairness Doctrine.

In 1988 Ronald Reagan abolished the Fairness Doctrine as a favor to the Christian right which was already plotting the takeover of AM Radio, and as a favor to the studio heads who had helped him get elected, who were plotting the takeover of all media. And today, as a result, there are five giant multi-national corporations who control virtually all 14,000 radio stations in America, all 5,000 television stations, 80 percent of our newspapers, all of our billboards and most of the large internet content. So there are five guys who are deciding what we hear as news and information.

News departments have become corporate profit centers. They no longer have an obligation to promote the public interest. Their only obligation is to their shareholders. And they serve that obligation, not by telling us about difficult issues that we need to understand, like what happens when you privatize social security and how do the pharmaceutical companies end up controlling Medicaid and Medicare, and what is global warming? Rather, they cut costs.

And guess where they cut? They cut costs by firing investigative reporters. 80 percent of investigative reporters have lost their jobs over the past 15 years. These are the people who connect the dots between the money that came from corporate polluters to the White House and the rollbacks that were engineered by the White House and the

asthmatic kids you see in New York City and all over this country. Nobody is connecting those dots. When you see an asthmatic kid you're not saying, the White House has something to do with that.

In 19 states you can no longer safely eat any fresh water fish caught in the state because of mercury contamination coming from coal burning power plants that were supposed to have removed 90 percent of that mercury five years ago but the White House, having accepted 48 million dollars from that industry, rolled back those rules so that now there are 19 states where all the fresh water fish are unsafe to eat. In 49 states, including New York, most of the fresh water fish is unsafe. The only state where all the fresh water fish is safe to eat is Wyoming where the Republican controlled legislature refused to appropriate money to test the fish.

According to CDC one out of every six American women has so much mercury in her womb, one out of every six, that her children are at risk of a grim inventory of diseases; autism, blindness, mental retardation, heart, liver and kidney disease. My levels of mercury are two and a half times what EPA considers safe just from eating fish. All of this could have been stopped except Bush abolished the Mercury Rule. But Americans don't know that. The reason they don't make the connection is because there are no investigative reporters out there telling them about that connection.

Corporate media also got rid of foreign news bureaus. When I was a kid ABC had 47 foreign news bureaus in Europe. Now it has none. They buy their news in a can from European producers. The only way you can get foreign news in this country is if you go to the BBC.

Americans are supposed to be the leaders of the entire world, and yet we have no idea of what's happening in other cultures, or other countries, and that's why we, the American people, we're gulled into this Neo-Con fantasy that we were going to be met by flowers and rose petals in the street when we went into Iraq.

Broadcasters have no obligation to promote the public interest. Their only obligation is to shareholders. And they serve that obligation, not by explaining difficult issues we need to understand to make rational decisions in a democracy, but by entertaining us, by appealing to the lowest common denominator, the prurient interest that all of us have in the reptilian core of our brain for sex and celebrity gossip. So they give us three weeks of Anna Nicole Smith. They give us Lacey Peterson and Kobe Bryant and Michael Jackson and Brad and Jennifer, Brad and Angelina. We know more about Kate and Tom than we do about global warming.

Americans today are the best entertained and the least informed people on the face of the Earth. And that has profound implications for our democracy because a democracy cannot function long without an informed public.

I have known this for many years. I do about thirty speeches a year in red states to Republican audiences and I get the same reaction from Republican audiences that I do from liberal college kids. The only difference is the Republicans come up afterwards and say, 'how come I never heard this before?' It's because you're getting your news from Rush Limbaugh and talk radio.

I came to the conclusion long ago that 80 percent of Republicans are just Democrats that don't know what's going on. In 2004 there was a survey done by the Public Policy Institute of the University of Maryland. It was a national survey that confirmed my own anecdotal observations.

If you look at Sunday morning television it appears that the red states have a monopoly on morality and the blue states are kind of disillusioned and degenerate. But this didn't jive with my experience or my own observations. In fact, I did a piece on this for Vanity Fair a couple of years ago. I asked my researchers to look at the incidence of morality in the various states and what they found was just the opposite from what was being presented by the media. The lowest teen pregnancy rate was in Massachusetts. The highest was Texas. The lowest divorce rate was Massachusetts, the highest Texas. The ten lowest divorce rates today are all blue states, the ten highest all red. The ten lowest teen pregnancy all blue, the ten highest all red. A red state resident is more likely to murder you, to commit a violent crime against you, to impregnate your teenage daughter, to watch Desperate Housewives on tv, to buy pornography, to play degenerate video games like Grand Theft Auto, etc., etc.

Researchers quizzed people based upon their knowledge of current events and party affiliation. What they found was that there is **not a values deficit but a huge information deficit among people who vote Republican.** For example, 70 percent of the people who said they voted for George Bush believed that Saddam Hussein bombed the World Trade Center. 70 percent believe weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq. 55 percent believe that the American invasion of Iraq was strongly supported by Muslims on the street, by Iraq's Muslim neighbors and by our traditional allies in Europe.

64 percent believe that President Bush strongly supported the Kyoto Protocol and strong labor and environmental standards in our international treaties. All that was totally wrong.

The researchers went back two more times. The second time they wanted to find out where the source of misinformation came from. Invariably the people who had all this misinformation said their primary news source was Fox News or talk radio.

They went back a third time to determine what people's essential values were. They asked a series of hypothetical questions. For example, what if there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? What if Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with bombing the World Trade Center? What if the American invasion of Iraq was mostly opposed on the Muslim street and among our traditional allies in Europe? Should we have still gone in? 84 percent of Democrats and 84 percent of Republicans said the same thing.

“We should not.” There was no difference in values. The only difference was in the information, **and that is why it is so critical to have a working press in our country.**

I did a piece on the Fairness Doctrine for Vanity Fair and went back and looked at the debates that occurred when the Fairness Doctrine was passed, almost unanimously by Republicans and Democrats in 1928. And they recalled the initial debates at the beginning of our country. There was a division between Jefferson, who wanted universal franchise, he wanted everybody to vote, and Hamilton, Adams and Madison who wanted to restrict the vote to land owners-gentry, not because they were snobs, not because they were undemocratic, but because they believed that the great mass of uninformed, uneducated people would not enforce the right to the civil rights these guys had laid down their lives and fortunes for. Hamilton, Adams and Madison said “Only an educated public, who has a long view, will do that.” Jefferson agreed and said himself, “An uninformed public will trade a hundred of years of hard fought civil rights for a half hour of welfare” – to the first religious fanatic or demigod or tyrant who comes along and promises them a \$300 tax break.

Jefferson said the remedy for this is not to deprive the public of their rights but rather to forcibly inform them, whether they want to be informed or not. That’s why the 13 colonies did something that nobody had done in history which was imposing mandatory public education, so you would go to jail if you did not go to school. Jefferson started educational institutes, the University of Virginia and others to force people to understand current events, to understand philosophy and history and all the other things we need to understand if we’re going to retain our democracy.

When the Fairness Doctrine came along everybody said hey, this is going to be the way that the public gets its information. We cannot afford to let this medium fall into the hands of a handful of profit making corporations who are going to use it to enhance their own position and consolidate their power with government against the people and against our constitutional rights. That’s why they passed the Fairness Doctrine.

It was destroyed by Reagan and then Clinton also through the Telecommunications Act. And this corporate consolidation is happening now. We are seeing the privatization of the American government and we have a government now that turned FEMA over to somebody who pays them campaign contributions. And the head of the Forest Service is a timber industry lobbyist Mark Gray, probably the most rapacious in history [Rapacious means to "rape". Not in the sexual sense but the older sense of plunder and destruction.]. The head of public land and mining industry lobby, Steven Griles, believes that public lands are unconstitutional.

The head of the Air Division at EPA is the utility lobbyist Jeffrey Homestead who’s represented nothing but the worst air polluters during his entire career. The head of Super Fund is a woman whose last job was teaching corporate polluters how to evade Super Fund. The second in command of EPA is a Monsanto lobbyist.

I did another piece in this month's Vanity Fair that shows that the top 100 environmental officials in the Department of Commerce which regulates Fishery, Department of Interiors, Department of Energy, Department of Agriculture, at the FDA, on the EPA and even the relevant division for the Justice Department are virtually, without exception, lobbyists from the worst of the worst of the worst of these polluters. And this is happening throughout our government, not just in the pollution but everywhere else where you're getting corporations who are now running American government.

What happens when you allow corporations to run our government? What you get is plunder. And I have to say this, the American people have to understand that there is a huge difference between free market capitalism, which is a good thing because it makes us more efficient, more prosperous, and more democratic, and the kind of corporate-crony capitalism which has been embraced by this White House.

The reason they shouldn't be running our government is because corporations don't want the same thing for America as Americans want. Corporations do not want free markets and they do not want democracy. They want profits and the best way for them to get the profits too often is to use our campaign financing system which is just a system of legalized bribery, to get their hooks into a public official, they use that public official to dismantle the market place, to give them monopoly control, and then to privatize the commons, to turn over our Treasury, our air, our water, our public lands, our wild life, our fishery, the shared resource of our society that give context to our community, that connects us to our past, that are the source of our values and our virtues and our character as a people, and we are turning that over, for profit, to these corporations.

We have to remember this, legally corporations cannot do good things. They cannot do true philanthropy, they can't do things that are good for our country or for our community. When you see Wal-Mart bringing bottled water down to the Katrina victims, they're not doing that to be good guys, they're doing it because they think that over the long run the public view of them will be enhanced and that that will enhance their shareholder value and their dividend distribution. If they have another reason for doing it, any one of their shareholders can sue them and they will win that lawsuit. It is called wasting corporate assets. It is against the law in this country for a corporation to turn itself into a philanthropy. And if they're caught doing it their board members will be punished and their shareholders can sue them.

We want corporations to be this way, to focus narrowly. We don't want them to turn into philanthropies because nobody would invest in them. We want them to focus narrowly on shareholder value, BUT, we would be nuts to let them anywhere near our government because we designed them to plunder and that's what they're going to do to us if we let them run our country. That's what they're doing now. That's why from the beginning of our national history, our greatest political leaders, Republicans and Democrats, have been warning Americans against the domination of corporate power.

Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican, said that America would never be destroyed by a foreign enemy, by an Osama bin Laden, but he warned that our Bill of Rights, our Constitution and our treasured democratic institutions would be subverted by malefactors of great wealth who would steal them from within.

Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, in his most famous speech ever warned Americans against a domination by the military industrial complex. Abraham Lincoln, the greatest Republican in history, said during the height of the Civil War in 1863, "I have the South in front of me and I have the bankers behind me and for my country I fear the bankers more." Franklin Roosevelt, during World War II, said that the domination of government by corporate power is "the essence of Fascism." Benito Mussolini, who had an insider's view of that process, said essentially the same thing. He complained that Fascism should not be called Fascism; it should be called Corporatism because it was the merger of state and corporate power.

What we have to understand in this country is that the domination of business by government is called Communism and the domination of government by business is called Fascism.

Our job is to walk that narrow trail between free market capitalism and democracy, holding big-government at bay with our right hand and big-business at bay with our left. And in order to do that we need an informed public that is able to recognize all the milestones of tyranny. To do that we need an aggressive and independent press that is willing to stand up and speak truth to power, and we no longer have that in the United States of America.

Thank you!

- Barry M. Goldwater was a five-term U.S. senator from Arizona and a champion of conservatism whose 1964 presidential candidacy launched a revolution within the Republican Party. He was regarded as the Grand Old Man of the Republican Party and one of the nation's most respected exponents of conservatism, which he sometimes defined as holding on to that which was tested and true and opposing change simply for the sake of change. It was a 1964 speech delivered on behalf of Mr. Goldwater that brought Reagan to national prominence and helped launch his political career.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is credited with leading the fight to protect New York City's water supply, but his reputation as a resolute defender of the environment stems from a litany of successful legal actions. The list includes winning numerous settlements for Riverkeeper, prosecuting governments and companies for polluting the Hudson River and Long Island Sound, arguing cases to expand citizen access to the shoreline, and suing treatment plants to force compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Mr. Kennedy acts as Chief Prosecuting Attorney for Riverkeeper. He also serves as Senior Attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council and as President of the Waterkeeper Alliance. At Pace University School of Law, he is a Clinical Professor and Supervising Attorney at the Environmental Litigation Clinic in White Plains, New York. Earlier in his career Mr. Kennedy served as Assistant District Attorney in New York City.

<http://www.robertfkennedyjr.com>