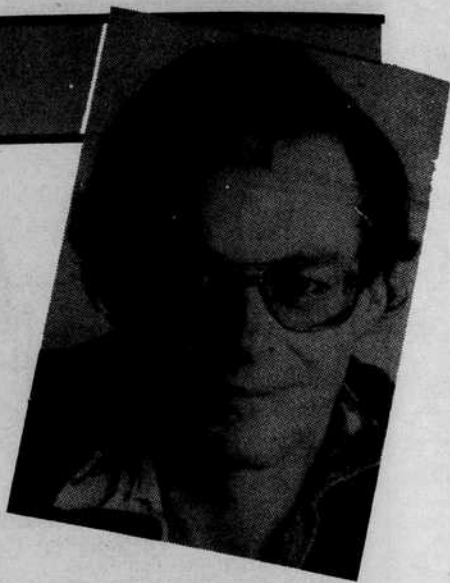


ASHES and DIAMONDS

by Alexander Cockburn



The Osprey Factor

Almost since the day he first entered the race for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, opinion has been sharply divided on the all important question of whether the President is on semi-permanent mental vacation, or is actually rather more on the ball than the press corps is prepared to concede.

I've always tended to incline towards the latter theory, on the grounds that Jerzy Kozinski notwithstanding you don't become president by accident. Thus far the Iran/Contra inquiry buttresses the on-the-ball school, showing that Reagan took a keen hour-by-hour interest in what North was up to.

Fans of the dotty-President theory got a big lift the other day at reports that Reagan had been seen playing with a model airplane. But even here all may not be what it seems. I quote from the "Defense Update" section of the July issue of a defense industry publication called *Rotor & Wing International*: "Will President Reagan officiate at ceremonies next year marking the first flight of the Bell-Boeing V-22 Osprey [helicopter]? Many believe he should, to market [sic] the historic nature of the event, still on target for June 1988. Rumors that he will go to Fort Worth for the maiden flight are growing since he was recently seen fiddling with a model of the new aircraft [underlining in original], given to him by U.S. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. P.X. Kelley. Kelley and the

Commander-in-chief spent some time in a recent White House meeting going over the V-22's virtues. When Reagan returned to his office, he took the model with him [underlining in original] rather than give it to an aide. Bell-Boeing officials hope that this small sign of interest can be parlayed into substantial support for the Osprey program."

Media Bias

When right-wingers like Reed Irvine press forward with astounding claims that the mainstream media are populated by ultra-liberals and even crypto-Bolsheviks, chances are they will cite studies by Robert and Linda Lichter. A few years ago the Lichters, wallowing in the usual mush of social scientific "objectivity," conducted surveys proposing the view that most of the reporting elite are only a couple of steps to the right of Trotsky. The truth, as anyone capable of turning on a TV set or opening a newspaper knows well, is that reporters maintain about the same revolutionary profile as Senator Bill Bradley.

The Lichters are now the co-directors of the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs, which describes itself as a "non-profit, non-partisan research institute, which itself takes no position on policy issues."

From this Institute has come a fairly predictable stream of Lichter-style research. One recent handout was headed "Scientists Say Chernobyl Won't Happen Here," with a clutch of pro-nuclear power findings filling up the page, as in, "A majority [from a poll of 580 scientists selected randomly from *American Men and Women of Science*] of 56 percent believe nuclear plants will be 'very important' in meeting America's future energy needs. . . . 71 percent rate a Chernobyl-type accident as improbable here. . . . 66 percent regard U.S. nuclear plants as currently safe. Robert Lichter concludes that the center's poll shows that Chernobyl had no apparent effect on the scientific community's belief in the safety of American nuclear plants."

You can gauge something of the Institute's likely predilections by the sort of friends it has. Back in 1984 the Lichters were canvassing support for the center. Among the mail they generated—which I'm glad to disclose here—was a testimonial from Edwin Meese, at that time counselor to the president. Meese wrote that a center set up by the Lichters would be "a valuable addition . . . to a better understanding of the role that the media plays in the shaping of the national agenda and public opinion."

The general view that the Reagan Administration is capable of any villainy has been fortified by the news from Panama.

Faith Whittlesey, still at the White House in the spring of 1984 before she went as an activist Reaganite ambassador to Switzerland, wrote that the Lichters "have confirmed what many of us always suspected about the worldview of journalists but it is good to have the objective data."

Pat Robertson, president of the Christian Broadcasting Network, wrote that "your center deserves to be funded by every citizen in this country who is concerned about the influence of both print media and television." Even more ecstatic was Pat Buchanan, just about to become director of communications for Reagan, who said that the Lichters had made "an invaluable contribution to America's understanding of inherent media bias and prejudice."

But best of all, from the Lichters' point of view, was a letter sent on April 23, 1985 from President Reagan himself, who said with his usual incisiveness that the Lichters' work was "scholarly not partisan" and that "perfect objectivity may be beyond

the reach of human nature, but fairness should be demanded of everyone."

Perhaps therefore it is not entirely surprising that two years later the center's *Media Monitor* should be saying sourly of news coverage of the Tower Commission's Report that "Questions of leadership and legality dominated the news agenda at the expense of policy debates;" that networks were using unnamed sources, and that "one story in six finished with a zinger—a closer with negative spin. . . . Negative closers were eight times as numerous as positive ones."

This is how the downward spiral of media conservatism is fortified. The Lichters, powerfully backed by Reagan and the others, turn out reports that tend to validate right wing conspiracy theory. These reports get rushed in front of media executives, particularly in television, who then tremble at charges of fostering the leftist conspiracy and redouble their vigilance against liberal contagion.

But let us leave the Lichters on a note of uplift. One of their more anguished reports recently bewailed the fact that TV entertainment portrays business as corrupt and businessmen as villains, and that whereas before 1965 two-thirds of the corporate executives shown on TV were good guys, that figure was cut in half during the following decade. (This, don't forget, was the decade that saw the rise of Nader's consumer movement and that ended with titans of the Fortune 500 sadly confessing their nefarious practices in contributing to Nixon's slush funds.)

Today, say the Lichters, businessmen on prime time programs are portrayed twice as negatively as characters in other occupations, commit crimes three times as often, do 40 percent of the murders committed by characters with census-listed occupations and are motivated by greed five times as often as other characters. Among shows portraying government business relations, over 80 percent portray business as too powerful.

This is one of the most uplifting accounts of prime-time TV I have seen

in years.

Fashion Notes

A couple of weeks spent in England recently showed me that even cities as hidebound as London can change rapidly. Six years ago the Soho district was even sleazier than I remember it from a generation ago, with low-rent sex shops vying for space with burger joints and other emblems of a world on the wane.

The Thatcherite boom in the south has changed all that. Vibrant yuppies leap in and out of brasserie-style restaurants (poached turbot with broad beans; lamp chops with tri-color peppercorns, etc., etc.) and the whores' stoops are being driven out by advertising agencies.

The big thing among disaffected youth is to wear t-shirts emblazoned with gigantic hammer and sickles, cyrillic letters and other iconic referents to the workers' state. I asked one fellow with the letterhead of the Soviet CP and Gorbachev's head all over his chest whether he was a communist. "Hah," he replied, "I can't read their books. Too effing boring. But this stuff really pisses off those Thatcherites."

The Panama Story

The general view in Britain that the Reagan Administration is capable of any villainy has been fortified by the news from Panama. As detailed here, the recently retired Panamanian Chief of Staff Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera has charged that the de facto Head of Panama, Defense Force Head General Manuel Noriega, conspired with the U.S. to assassinate Noriega's popular predecessor Omar Torrijos and rigged the 1984 elections. The Colonel also said that Noriega had

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