The American media: a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights—Part 4

Television personnel: a few profiles

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The world of television news analysis in the US is composed of individuals with pro-establishment and essentially right-wing views and connections, or liberals and "moderates" who continuously accommodate themselves to the right. Here are some of the figures who commented on the recent post-election crisis and attempted to shape public perceptions of the extraordinary events.

Fox News Channel, owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, employs numerous commentators with direct connections to the Republican Party and the ultra-right. **Brit Hume**, the anchor of *Special Report with Brit Hume*, is notorious for his conservative views. While chief White House correspondent with ABC News, Hume was President George Bush's tennis partner. Hume is a contributing editor at Murdoch's right-wing *Weekly Standard*. When NBC News, in the midst of the impeachment crisis, decided against airing an interview with Bill Clinton's rape-accuser, Juanita Broaddrick, Hume wore a button on his lapel that read "Free Lisa Myers," in honor of the NBC correspondent who had done the Broaddrick piece.

Tony Snow, host of *Fox News Sunday*, is another well-known right-winger. A journalist from 1979, with stops at the *Detroit News* (1984-87), as deputy editorial page editor, and the *Washington Times* (1987-91), as editorial page editor, Snow went to work in the White House for George Bush in 1991. He functioned first as Bush's chief speech writer (Deputy Assistant to the President for Communications and Director of Speech Writing) and later as Deputy Assistant to the President for Media Affairs.

Another *Weekly Standard* stalwart, **John Podhoretz**, is Fox's media and society contributor and a particularly unpleasant figure. He also serves as the editorial page editor on Murdoch's sensationalist tabloid, the *New York Post*. Podhoretz served as speech writer for President Ronald Reagan and special assistant to "Drug Czar" William Bennett. He too worked for the Rev. Moon's *Washington Times*, as assistant managing editor.

One of Fox News's on-air contributors and a permanent fixture on the news talk show circuit is **John Fund**. A collaborator with the ultra-right radio demagogue Rush Limbaugh on a book, *The Way Things Ought To Be*, Fund is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Wall Street Journal*, where he previously served as deputy features editor. The *Journal*, of course, spearheaded the impeachment crusade against Bill Clinton and has recently published incendiary articles in the wake of the November 7 election. Its editorial page is a cesspool of reaction.

Another veteran of the *Wall Street Journal* is **David Asman**, host of *Fox In Depth*, a "daily program featuring interviews with newsmakers of the day." Before his tenure at Fox, Asman served as Op-Ed editor of the *Journal*. He began at the newspaper in 1983, editing the Manager's Journal and the Americas column. In 1994 he was named senior editor of the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page.

An on-air political contributor since October 1996, **Monica Crowley** functioned as former President Richard Nixon's Foreign Policy Assistant from 1990 to 1994, and authored *Nixon Off the Record*. She also writes for the *New York Post*.

Washington DC-based political analyst **Jim Pinkerton** has worked for Fox News Channel since it started up. He is a regular on *Fox News Watch*. Pinkerton worked in the White House under Reagan and Bush, and also in the 1980, 1984, 1988 and 1992 Republican presidential campaigns.

A contributor on women's issues, **Amy Holmes** has worked for Fox since June 1998. She is manager of the Independent Women's Forum, one of billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife's stable of right-wing political outfits and a breeding ground for various pro-impeachment conspirators and television commentators. **Heather Nauert** works for Fox News Channel as a political contributor. In June 1998, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich appointed her to the White House Conference on Retirement Savings. During the right's campaign against the Clintons' health care plan, Nauert established and led a group called Americans for Freedom of Choice in Healthcare.

The chairman and CEO of the Fox News division is **Roger Ailes**, a longtime Republican Party political consultant and hatchet-man, adviser to Nixon, Reagan, Bush, former New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

These filthy individuals and others like them— **Sean Hannity**, **Bill O'Reilly**, **Fred Barnes**, **Matt Drudge**, **John Ellis** (Bush's first cousin who called Florida for him on election night), etc.—put Fox News Channel's promise of "fairness and balance" in perspective.

The right-wing bias of Murdoch's network is hardly a secret. Other television commentators, however, present themselves as independent-minded and unbiased journalists, while presenting quite reactionary conceptions.

At first glance CNN's senior political analyst, **Bill Schneider**, for example, appears nothing more than a glorified opinion pollster. Schneider's specialty normally involves superficial attempts at taking the country's political temperature. During the post-November 7 period, however, he was one of those, like many in the media, who kept insisting that the American people were eager for quick resolution of the crisis. This argument, whose aim at least in part was precisely to encourage the spread of such a sentiment in the population, amounted to aid to the Bush camp, who were pushing for an end to all challenges to the official (and

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fraudulent) Florida vote tally.

One commentator quoted Schneider on this theme: "'How much is winning this election worth?' scolded CNN analyst Bill Schneider. 'Is it worth creating a constitutional crisis?'" (Another 'grand old man' of television news who argued along the same bankrupt lines was CBS's **Bob Schieffer**, longtime moderator of *Face the Nation*. Schieffer remarked, "The country is much more important to me than whether Al Gore gets his final ambition or George Bush." Very patriotic-sounding, but the effect was to assist the usurpation of power by Bush.)

A little investigation demonstrates that Schneider keeps some foul company. The CNN senior political analyst is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC. Other scholars and fellows at the AEI include: Robert Bork, the extreme right-wing Court of Appeals judge whose nomination to the Supreme Court was beaten off in 1987, and author of *Slouching towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, a violent attack on the notion of social equality; Lynne V. Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and wife of the vice president-elect, Dick Cheney; Dinesh D'Souza, right-wing ideolog and author of *The End of Racism*; former House Speaker Newt Gingrich; Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the UN; Irving Kristol, one of the original neo-conservatives, and father of **William Kristol**, television talk show habitué and editor of the *Weekly Standard*; Charles Murray, co-author of *The Bell Curve*, which argued for the natural inferiority of blacks and the poor; and Richard N. Perle, Reagan's assistant secretary of defense for international security policy. Schneider comes by his anti-democratic leanings honestly.

Tim Russert, moderator of NBC's interview program *Meet the Press*, and NBC News Washington bureau chief, played a pernicious role during the impeachment crisis. Russert was one of those who claimed to be taking the moral high ground, castigating Clinton's behavior, while spreading the salacious gossip put out by the right wing. (Typical Russert sound-bite: "There are lots of suggestions coming out of people close to Ken Starr that perhaps the Secret Service 'facilitated' [i.e., pimped] for President Clinton. Remember that code word—it was used by state troopers in Little Rock.... Was the Secret Service—was a Secret Service agent—an accomplice in trying to cover up a relationship with Monica Lewinsky?" The fact that this story, and dozens like it, attributed to "unnamed sources," proved to be false, never stopped Russert and his media cohorts.)

Russert is a Democrat, a former adviser to New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Governor Mario Cuomo. He seems the personification of self-satisfied, prosperous ex-liberalism, with his constant smirk and relentlessly shallow commentary. (For instance, following the second presidential debate this fall, Russert maintained that Bush had gained ground because he had established "parity" with Gore on command of foreign affairs. Gore is a bourgeois politician of distinctly unremarkable caliber, but Bush, it should be recalled, consistently demonstrated appalling ignorance of the most elementary facts of world politics.)

Yet Russert is considered a major "player." Former Clinton adviser Paul Begala commented, "Russert is enormously influential. In fact, he might have crossed from the realm of influence into that of power. When I was at the White House ... there wasn't a day that would go by without my contacting him." What a commentary on Washington and the Clinton administration!

Russert's background raises an interesting question. The role of the Christian [Protestant] neo-fascist element has been relatively well documented, and the impeachment crisis made one aware of the degree to which a certain layer of Jewish professionals had swung to the right, but the part played by right-wing Catholics (and perhaps behind them, the Church officialdom) in the anti-Clinton drive is one that has yet to be chronicled. Russert's background is Irish Catholic. Public shows of morality (and moralizing) seem to be one of his defining characteristics. In 1995 the National Father's Day Committee named Russert "Father of the Year," and *Washingtonian* magazine cited him as a "Real Dad." Parents magazine honored him as a "Dream Dad" in 1998 and Irish-American magazine has named Russert as one of the top 100 Irish Americans in the US.

This is suggestive because **Chris Matthews**, another anti-Clinton blowhard (and former Democratic Party operative), also has a Catholic background, as does **Maureen Dowd**, the high priestess of the *New York Times* vice squad. Then there are the more openly right-wing Catholics such as O'Reilly of Fox and Pat Buchanan, the Reform Party presidential candidate.

Another insufferable statesman of the airwaves is ABC *Nightline*'s **Ted Koppel**, he of the clipped speech and permanently crenellated hair. Koppel effects Olympian detachment and intellectual weight. One looks in vain for the substance behind the mannered style. Like his less pretentious brethren, Koppel is little more than a conduit for US government and ruling elite propaganda. Can anyone remember him ever standing up to the powers that be? Has he ever challenged conventional wisdom or fought tooth and nail for an unpopular position?

Koppel was born in Lancashire, England in 1940, the son of German Jewish refugees from Hitler. His father had owned a major tire factory in Germany. His family came to the US in the early 1950s. Koppel, after attending Syracuse and Stanford universities, went to work for ABC News in 1963. He was named anchor of *Nightline*, the late-night news and interview program, at the time of its debut in March 1980.

Jeff Cohen, of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), describes Koppel as an "individual who has, for his whole career, been virtually a mouthpiece for the U.S. State Department." Cohen backs up the characterization, pointing out that Koppel began his career as the Hong Kong bureau chief for ABC News, where he and they covered up the US role in Vietnam and, in particular, CIA operations in Laos.

Norman Solomon, another critic, has documented Koppel's role: "From 1969 to 1971, Koppel paid several visits to the Southern Laos site of Pakse, where CIA and U.S. military personnel—unknown to the American public—were assisting and directing continuous bomb runs by the Laotian air force. 'These guys were all in civilian clothes,' Koppel told me in a 1990 interview. 'None of them admitted to being in the military—or with the CIA, for that matter. They all claimed to be civilian contract employees.'

"Koppel acknowledged that, at the time, he knew the facts were otherwise: 'I may have known that, but I wasn't in a position to prove it.' His news reports made no mention of the CIA and U.S. military involvement, even though it was central to the bombing that he witnessed.

"Walter J. Smith, a U.S. Air Force officer at Pakse, was present when Koppel showed up with a cameraman at the base officers' club. Smith heard Koppel stress that he would not dislodge the official fig-leaf: 'In effect, he was saying, "I'm not going to tell the truth no matter what happens."'"

Cohen notes that Koppel rose in ABC during the 1970s, "and he became [part of] what is called the KKK Club, where it would be Bernard Kalb, Marvin Kalb, and Ted Koppel, who were big network correspondents, who had traveled the world with Henry Kissinger singing his praises as he went around the world wheeling and dealing. And Henry Kissinger, in the eyes of them at the time, was basically a foreign policy genius. And the human rights abuses, that were the direct results of Kissinger's policies, weren't exactly emphasized by Bernard Kalb, Marvin Kalb, or Ted Koppel."

Solomon comments: "Long ago, Koppel declared himself 'proud to be a friend of Henry Kissinger' and ranked his pal (who orchestrated bloody foreign-policy deceptions from Vietnam to Chile) as 'certainly one of the two or three great secretaries of state of our century.' Such biases infuse

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Koppel's TV work, as when he told 'Nightline' viewers in April 1992: 'If you want a clear foreign-policy vision, someone who will take you beyond the conventional wisdom of the moment, it's hard to do any better than Henry Kissinger.'"

FAIR monitored Koppel's programming in the 1980s during the period of the Reagan administration's covert war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Cohen observes that this was a period when "the Reagan White House had one public relations goal in Central America: get all the U.S. media to focus on human rights violations in Nicaragua, and get little or no media coverage on human rights violations in El Salvador, which by every standard were far more severe. More violence, more incarcerations, more disappearances, more suppression of the press. The fact is, when you study Koppel, he did I think it was over 22 different programs focusing on the negatives of the government in Nicaragua: human rights abuses, problems between the government and the press in Nicaragua, meaning one newspaper that they were polarized with, and zero programs during a 40-month period on El Salvador. Now that's pretty big success for the public relations operatives at the Reagan White House and the U.S. State Department. I don't know how much closer you could become to a state broadcast outlet than that."

Solomon points out that "American critics of foreign policy were almost invisible. Koppel didn't see a problem. 'We are governed by the president and his cabinet and their people,' he fired back. 'And they are the ones who are responsible for our foreign policy, and they are the ones I want to talk to.'" In other words, "I only talk to those in power." There's the unmistakable voice of a free and democratic-minded press!

A former colleague of Koppel's at ABC News and *Nightline*, **Jeff Greenfield**, is currently a senior analyst at CNN, where he went to work in 1998. Greenfield, a New York native, was a bit of a "left" in his youth, of a cynical sort. From 1968 to 1970 he served as chief speech writer for New York City's liberal Republican Mayor John V. Lindsay, and in 1967-68 he was a Senate aide and speech writer for Senator Robert F. Kennedy. In 1972 he co-authored *A Populist Manifesto* with longtime *Village Voice* columnist and Robert Kennedy idolater, Jack Newfield.

Greenfield has been around. He was an analyst for PBS's *Firing Line*, hosted by right-winger William F. Buckley, and *We Interrupt This Week*. He subsequently joined CBS, working as a media critic during that network's coverage of the 1980 Republican and Democratic conventions and the 1980 presidential election. For 14 years Greenfield functioned as ABC News's political and media analyst.

He has carved out something of a niche for himself. Greenfield takes it upon himself to justify and explain away every twist and turn of American public life. He is the great rationalizer, particularly of political reaction. None of the activities and provocations of the right wing, from impeachment to the Bush grab for power, are cause for alarm in Greenfield's view. Each bit of dirty business turns out to be no more than a necessary stage in the unfolding of the great American national experiment, whose predetermined outcome has been miraculously revealed to CNN's senior analyst. He is there to reassure his audience. He has it on good authority that nothing will go seriously wrong.

Greenfield's performance during the final week of the election crisis was typical: a special segment proving that the Bush-Gore standoff couldn't have happened at a more fortuitous moment, when Americans are content and the country is enjoying unprecedented stability and tranquillity.

The CNN analyst possesses the quality that seems so pervasive in the US news media: bottomless sycophancy in the face of established authority. Is there anyone in American political office that Greenfield could not find a good word for? Nearly all the leading media types are like that. During the Republican convention this summer a commentator noted CNN anchor Judy Woodruff's obsequious remark that vice presidential nominee Dick Cheney had "delivered a speech, from a soft spoken man, that delivered a walloping speech.... Jeff Greenfield agrees—in awe—with Judy." That sounds about right.

Greenfield, along with so many others, flowed with the reactionary current during the Kenneth Starr impeachment drive in 1998-99, failing to challenge the threat to democratic rights this witch-hunt represented. Indeed Greenfield provided a rationale for one of the key assaults on elementary rights.

A favored technique of Starr's office was to leak sealed grand jury testimony unfavorable to Bill Clinton, which then became the basis for sensationalized and unsubstantiated reports in the media.

The *World Socialist Web Site* commented at the time: "Leaking grand jury testimony is a federal crime, and, from a legal standpoint, of a far more serious character than giving false testimony in a deposition in a civil case, such as the Paula Jones suit. Witnesses called to testify before a grand jury do not have the benefit of legal counsel while they are being questioned. The promise that their statements will not be made public is the main protection they have against retaliation for their testimony" ("Clinton crisis exposes threat to democratic rights," 7 February 1998).

Greenfield, who was one of those passing along morsels tossed out by Starr, responded in a different fashion. When challenged by a critic, Jane Prettyman, Greenfield (in a written response) first compared the publicizing of the grand jury testimony to the leaking of the Pentagon Papers—a secret multi-volume history of the Vietnam War commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—to the *New York Times* by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971.

Greenfield continued: "The whole point of the First Amendment was to make the press a guardian of the public's right to information, even when officials want to keep that information secret."

Prettyman effectively exposed Greenfield's hypocrisy and sophistry, noting that "the First Amendment was granted not for the benefit of media corporations but for the benefit of the People ... so that we might have a free flow of information to defend ourselves against tyrannical government.... Ken Starr and his staff of prosecutors are a powerful part of the government, some would say tyrannical government.... The dissemination of Grand Jury material ... has, instead, the effect of reducing rather than enhancing our freedom in relation to government."

She continued: "The general public does not have a 'right to know' the contents of Grand Jury proceedings. The 'free flow of information' stops at the door of the secret Grand Jury—and for good reasons—not for reasons of national security (as the Government tried to argue in the Pentagon Papers case), but for reasons of personal security of individual citizens, to protect their freedom in relation to a one-sided prosecutorial government action without due recourse of law."

We can be fairly certain that such arguments fell on deaf ears. When faced with a choice between the defense of elementary democratic and constitutional rights, on the one hand, and the opportunity to advance his own career and move ever closer to those in positions of power, on the other, Greenfield, like the overwhelming majority of television and print journalists in the US, is not likely to hesitate.

What social processes and conditions have created such people? They are the products, first, of the social gap that has widened over the past two decades under Reagan, Bush and Clinton. Prosperous and complacent, living in a different world than ordinary people, they are naturally hostile to the interests of the poor and the working class. They have consciously repudiated 1960s activism and turned their backs on opposition generally. They have the expectation, if they keep their noses clean, of greater and greater wealth and prestige. The watchwords are: Never stick your neck out! Respect every cliché! Repeat the obvious!

Intellectually, the media figures fear and despise serious analysis. They are ignorant of and lack interest in history. They don't see themselves as representatives of social or historical forces (although they are) and fail to recognize any such forces at work. Everything is reduced to small change—individual motive, the immediate ebb and flow of public opinion.

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Never a probing, complicated thought. Nothing disturbs them except signs of discontent. These people always put the best face on; the word “crisis” has been banned from their lexicon—they pretend or believe that the skies are always sunny and there is clear sailing ahead.

Mediocrities and self-important nobodies, the “senior analysts” and “chief correspondents” and assorted pundits and experts, without a shred of wit or wisdom between them, foresee nothing and prepare no one. Along with the rest of the ruling elite, they are unprepared for the turmoil to come. How will they react? One can only imagine.

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