

The US media: a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights—Part 6

Who is the Wall Street Journal's Robert Bartley?

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This is the sixth in a series of articles on the ideological and political role of the American media. The seventh and final article on the role of the liberal press will be appearing in the coming week.

The response of the editorial and opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to the US post-election crisis was entirely predictable. The newspaper's editors dismissed any questions of democratic rights and accused the Democratic Party and its “squads” of “political lawyers” of attempting to hijack the election in a “Gore Coup d'Etat.” The *Journal* called on Katherine Harris, the Florida Secretary of State and co-chair of George W. Bush's campaign in the state, as well as the Florida legislature and the US Supreme Court to put an end to the counting of votes and declare Bush the winner.

In an inflammatory editorial, entitled “The Democratic Party's War on the Military,” the newspaper attempted to rouse the armed forces against the possibility of an Al Gore victory, making much of the few hundred absentee ballots from overseas military personnel thrown out because they failed to meet legal standards.

In the pages of the *Journal*, Peggy Noonan, right-winger and former Reagan speech writer, compared the fight against the Democrats to the struggle against Hitler in World War II. In an editorial ominously headlined “The Squeamish GOP?” the *Journal* editors urged the Republicans to run roughshod over all opposition, and called on the Republican-controlled Florida legislature to select its own slate of presidential electors who would vote for Bush regardless the ultimate determination of the winner of the state's popular vote. The *Journal* said such a course of action would be “precisely the best preparation for what may lie ahead.” It continued: “It is Governor Bush's nature to extend the velvet glove, but he will be much more successful if he and his party can show that within it there is some steel.”

Following the riot November 22 outside a meeting of the Miami-Dade canvassing board organized by Republican operatives, the *Journal's* Paul Gigot gloated about the successful shutting down of the legally-mandated hand recount: “The canvassers then stunned everybody and caved. They canceled any recount and certified the original Nov. 7 election vote.... Republicans rejoiced and hugged like they'd just won the lottery.”

As noted, there is nothing surprising about the *Wall Street Journal's* response. After all, the daily newspaper of the financial elite spent the past seven years first de-legitimizing and then attempting to destabilize the Democratic Clinton administration through all the sordid twists and turns of the Whitewater, Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky scandals, culminating in the impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton.

The *Journal's* editorial and op-ed pages have been in the thick of every

assault on democratic rights in recent years. The newspaper's editors distort, manipulate and lie in the pursuit of their right-wing goals. Innuendo, character assassination, smears, guilt by association, political witch-hunting—these are their stock in trade. The *Journal's* editorial page writers cannot properly be described as journalists. It would be more accurate to characterize them as political provocateurs and right-wing thugs in print. Over the past decade in particular, these people have carved out a sinister niche for themselves in American political life.

Robert Bartley is the chief editorial thug. Born in Minnesota and raised in Ames, Iowa, the son of a veterinarian, Bartley went to work for the *Journal* in 1962. After brief stints in its Chicago and Philadelphia bureaus, he joined the editorial page staff in New York City in 1964. He was appointed editor of the editorial page in 1972, editor of the *Journal* in 1979 and a vice-president in 1983. He has guided the newspaper's editorial policies for more than a quarter of a century.

Bartley is an ultra-right ideologue. By some combination of social and psychological processes he long ago developed a pathological hatred for the radicalism of the 1960s and lays virtually all of the evils of the world at its door. At the time of the shooting of Dr. David Gunn, who performed abortions, by a right-wing fanatic in Pensacola, Florida in March 1993, the *Journal* editorialized, “We think it is possible to identify the date when the United States ... began to tip off the emotional tracks.... The date is August 1968 when the Democratic National Convention found itself sharing Chicago with the street fighters of the anti-Vietnam War movement.”

Conversely, the *Journal* editor is a worshipper of everything Reaganite and everything that smacks of the 1980s. He devoted an entire, tedious book, *The Seven Fat Years — and How To Do It Again*, to praise of that era.

Bartley takes credit for devising, or at least encouraging, supply-side economics, the theory that cutting government spending and taxes on the rich will stimulate economic growth. (Bartley, in an interview, said: “We are generally credited with inventing supply-side economics or at least spreading the word out or popularizing it, really, starting well before Ronald Reagan—starting in the middle of the 1970s, really.”)

This is not so much an economic theory, as a right-wing political perspective and a rationale for deepening social inequality. The emergence and sudden respectability of supply-side economics in the 1980s betokened the rejection by a substantial part of the establishment of the social reformist consensus that had dominated American politics since World War II.

There is a substantial segment of the American ruling elite that considers any restrictions on the ability to accumulate personal wealth an

unbearable burden, and Bartley is one of those who translates this element's avarice and ruthlessness into prose. Such people thrived under Reagan as never before in the modern era, and viewed the possible election of Clinton in 1992 with deep suspicion and hostility. "At the end of the day," the *Journal* pronounced somberly on the eve of the 1992 election, "Bill Clinton stands for bigger government."

Despite the best efforts of Clinton to placate big business and right-wing public opinion, Bartley and his milieu considered any hint of an easing in the assault on living standards, social programs and trade union rights impermissible and dangerous. By the early 1990s the elementary social intuition that policies of continuously enriching the already wealthy would produce popular resistance may have disturbed the sleep of Bartley and his crowd. The Democrats, the union leaderships, the civil rights organizations had put up no serious resistance to Reagan's policies; on the contrary, they had collaborated, at one level or another, in their implementation. Yet it was obvious that public opinion was turning against the previous decade's ethos. Bartley was alarmed. In his *Seven Fat Years*, published in 1992, the *Journal* editor termed "the reemergence of 'the fairness issue'" (i.e., the question of social equality) an "ominous development" of the 1990s (p. 271).

The specter of social reformism reappearing in some form, however diluted, haunted the extreme right. Hadn't they seen the end of that, once and for all, under Reagan? Confusing Clinton's half-hearted criticisms of "trickle-down" economics with resurgent liberalism and even radicalism, the *Journal* vented its displeasure at the Democratic First Family. And insofar as the Clintons opportunistically played the populist card now and again, they could and would never be forgiven. Bill and Hillary Clinton might have forgotten all about certain comments they once made, and desired nothing so much as getting on with the "nation's business," but Bartley and his friends had long memories. An op-ed piece published in the March 30, 1994 edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, which by then had hit its Whitewater stride, begins with these imperishable quotations:

"The 1980s ushered in a Gilded Age of greed and selfishness, of irresponsibility and excess and of neglect.—BILL CLINTON, announcement speech for president, October 1991.

The 1980s were about acquiring—acquiring wealth, power, privilege.—HILLARY CLINTON, in the *Washington Post*, May 6, 1993."

Is there anything more pitiable and futile—and politically hazardous—than a liberal's denunciations of a reactionary social process that he or she has no intention of combating? The *Journal* might have said, "With these words, and others like them, the Clintons signed their own death warrant."

Historians of the future will be in a better position to determine at which moment Bartley and his ilk decided upon the course of attempting to oust the Clinton administration. Did they ever recognize the Clinton presidency as legitimate? Or was it, for example, the Clintons' health care plan?

In a 1995 introduction to the paperback edition of his pro-Reagan book, Bartley wrote: "In a paroxysm of big-government activism, the new president also proposed a vast health-care reform, dispatching his wife and 500 experts to think real hard and reorder 14 percent of the gross domestic product.... Indeed, the health-care debate bids to become a defining moment in American public opinion."

In any event, seizing upon an obscure land deal known as Whitewater in which the Clintons were involved—one that had occurred over a decade before in Arkansas—the *Journal's* editors launched their effort to remove a constitutionally elected government in early 1993 and never let up. The *Wall Street Journal* ultimately published five volumes, of 500 to 600 pages each, containing their editorials and comments (with only a relative handful of news articles) on the Clinton administration's "scandals."

These 2,500 or so pages radiate malice and subjectively-motivated hatred. They are also full of much unadulterated nonsense. It is an astonishing work. The point was made more than once by the *World*

Socialist Web Site during the course of the Kenneth Starr inquisition: if this is what the ruling elite, or a prominent section of it, directs toward *one of its own*, what does it have in store for layers of the population who seriously oppose and threaten its rule?

One of the first victims of the *Wall Street Journal's* venom in 1993 was Vincent Foster, deputy White House counsel and a law partner of Hillary Clinton's in the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, Arkansas. On June 17 the *Journal* ran a comment entitled, "Who is Vincent Foster?" It began: "In its first months, the Clinton White House has proved itself to be careless about many things, from Presidential haircuts to appointing a government. But most disturbing is its carelessness about following the law." The editors made much of the fact that Foster had refused to send the newspaper a photograph of himself. The *Journal* proceeded to file a request for a photo under the Freedom of Information Act.

One week later the *Journal* printed another snide opinion piece, "Vincent Foster's Victory," which concerned an appeals court decision permitting Hillary Clinton to hold meetings of her Health Task Force in private. It sarcastically suggested that with "one mighty sweep he [Foster] has struck a blow for separation of powers, executive authority, critics of the litigation explosion, and we dare say, even for the formulators of the Reagan White House's off-the-books Iran-Contra operation.... [W]e suspect that Vincent Foster and Ollie North might hit it off."

On July 14, in "FBI Director Rose?," the *Journal* referred to a "Rose clique from Little Rock that has already shown a willingness to cut many legal corners..." In "What's the Rush?" (July 19), the editors referred to Hillary Clinton and Foster, "both of whom were also involved in the travel-office affair [involving the firing of White House travel office staff]." It continued, "The mores on display from the Rose alumni are far from confidence-building."

Foster was apparently made distraught by the editorials, which he felt were mean-spirited and baseless. He believed, reasonably enough, that the *Journal* would continue attacking him and others. He told his sister that friends and colleagues in Arkansas would read the pieces and expressed concern that his reputation, which he valued, would be damaged. Foster had told an audience at the University of Arkansas Law School in a commencement address two months earlier: "The reputation you develop for intellectual and ethical integrity will be your greatest asset or your worst enemy..."

On July 20, 1993 Foster drove to Fort Marcy Park in Virginia and shot himself to death. The *Journal* campaign was not the only factor in his suicide, but it clearly played a significant role. A torn note was eventually found in his briefcase, which read, in part, "The WSJ editors lie without consequence." It concluded, "I was not meant for the job or the spotlight of public life in Washington. Here ruining people is considered sport."

The response of the *Journal* to Foster's suicide was chilling. It ran a piece, blandly headlined "A Washington Death," which, after perfunctorily expressing sorrow, went on to demand an investigation into his death. "The American public," the editors asserted, "is entitled to know if Mr. Foster's death was somehow connected to his high office."

Bartley subsequently filed a Freedom of Information request and eventually went to court to seek investigative reports on Foster's death. For months the newspaper did everything in its power to fuel the theory of the lunatic fringe that Foster had been murdered because he knew too much about Whitewater. More than half a year later, in a January 14, 1994 piece, "The Foster Test," it argued, "Until the Foster death is seriously studied, a Banquo's ghost will stalk not only the independent investigation but the next three years of the Clinton administration."

The Foster incident was only one of the most lethal of the *Journal's* campaign of provocations. Many other individuals had their reputations dragged through the mud. The 2,500 pages of the *Journal's* Whitewater opus are studded with names and incidents that no one remembers any longer because they turned out to be nothing but red herrings. They served

their momentary purpose of poisoning the political atmosphere and fueling the right-wing offensive against the Clintons.

An unflattering comment on the *Journal's* first collection of Whitewater pieces by the *Columbia Journalism Review's* James Boylan (January/February 1995) included the following observation:

"The impression given by this meandering collection is that the Whitewater enterprise itself, which is never really explained comprehensively after the editorial 'Whitewater: A Primer' of December 28, 1993, did not as such deeply engage the editorial mind. This impression is confirmed in the index, which has less than two and a half inches devoted to Whitewater in thirty-seven pages. Whitewater ends up meaning, Humpty Dumpty style, just what the *Journal* chooses it to mean, neither more nor less.

"This elasticity permits the *Journal's* editorialists to use Whitewater to concoct a strange, dark, near-criminal world of illicit connections, covert influence, and, in an almost puritan sense, sin. In this context, Clinton's alleged radicalism, a constant target of Rush Limbaugh and his ilk, is not even mentioned. The topic is sin, and that's what the *Journal* is agin—so much so that one is left wondering whether this is indeed the Clinton administration, or Caligula's."

The newspaper regularly passed on crackpot theories and rumors that emerged from the sewer where extreme right-wing outfits and paranoiacs dwell. Even when they pooh-pooed the stories, the *Journal* did so in a manner intended to leave questions in the readers' minds.

One piece in particular, "The Falwell Tape," (July 19, 1994) is a classic example of the "Bartley touch." The editors first make light of the videotape "The Clinton Chronicles"—produced by religious rightist Jerry Falwell—which repeats a whole number of thoroughly discredited anti-Clinton conspiracy theories, but take the trouble to include the telephone number where the scurrilous video might be obtained. They continue, "And yet, the Falwell tape and the controversy around it get at something important about the swirl of Arkansas rumors and the dilemma it presents a press that tries to be responsible." The *Journal* notes that an individual on the tape, one Gary Parks, accuses Clinton of having had his (Parks') father, the head of a firm that once provided local security for the Clinton presidential campaign, gunned down.

The newspaper continues: "This is old news to any of the journalists covering Arkansas scandals, but few of us have shared any of this knowledge with our readers. We suspect Jerry Parks had plenty of reasons to have enemies, and that his family may be overwrought. Finding no real evidence of a Clinton connection, and feeling that the President of the United States is entitled to a presumption of innocence, we decline in the name of responsibility to print what we've heard."

Thus, in the name of not repeating a slanderous rumor, Bartley's scribes repeat it.

The paper then lists a number of individuals, loosely connected to Whitewater or Arkansas public life, who have died, by murder or by their own hands. The editors continue: "For our own part, we cannot for a minute imagine Bill Clinton knowingly involved, even tangentially, in plots of violence. We believe some of the deaths are indeed coincidental suicides and that *most* of the violence has separate causes" (emphasis added). The editors are nearly as sincere as Mark Antony in his oration over the corpse of Caesar: "For Brutus is an honorable man..."

The 2,500 pages are replete with smears, amalgams and insinuations, and at times out and out defamation of character. In an extraordinary piece, "Whitewater and Watergate" (April 25, 1997), the editors introduced the notion, helped along by a comment from Richard Nixon's former associate and attorney Leonard Garment in the *New York Times*, that Clinton was a "sociopath." The editors opined: "No President is likely to meet the clinical definition of a sociopath; what psychiatrists call an 'anti-social personality,' a complete obliviousness to the normal rules of society, is evident in early adolescence and will to lead to jail [sic]

rather than high office. ... Yet clearly he [Clinton] has 'the presidential gene,' perhaps even more so than Richard Nixon.... [O]ur judgment is that in fact that Mr. Clinton is guilty of essentially the same things over which Mr. Nixon was hounded from office—abusing his office to cover up criminal activity by himself and his accomplices, and misleading the public with a campaign of lies about it."

If there was any pathological player in the Whitewater and Lewinsky affair, it was the editorial collective of the *Wall Street Journal*, who worked themselves into a frenzy over largely invented crimes and maintained that frenzy for a period of years. Some of the material is simply unhinged.

In "School for Scandal" (March 25, 1994) Mark Helprin, one of Bartley's brain trust and a former speech writer for Bob Dole, argued that Clinton had brought the scandals on himself by conducting "a messianic presidency with only 43% of the popular vote.... And of that 43% many were unaware of Hillary hiding in the bushes to the left of the candidate, like the 900-pound boyfriend of a voluptuous girl hitchhiker." Helprin continued in this breathless manner for a number of passages. The "slavish obedience" of the press, he argued, had "quintupled the arrogance of the most arrogant people in America, a triumphalist coterie of graduate students who accord to the hard left the same uneasy respect that most people reserve for the clergy, and grow teary-eyed over bats, squirrels and caribou as with barely concealable pleasure they sacrifice whole regions of rednecks."

More Helprin: "Somewhere between the core of the left and the 43% plurality that made Bill Clinton commander in chief are the American voters who thought they were supporting a 'New Democrat' and wound up instead with a slightly more buttoned-up version of the Village People. Boris Yeltsin, who ought to know whereof he speaks, calls Bill Clinton a 'socialist,' and General Jaruzelski, the former military dictator of Poland, looking more than ever like one of the three blind mice, says that he still retains the values of the left and that, 'Actually, in Clinton's program I see elements I like a lot.'"

There is something aberrant about this piece and others like it.

But Clinton, as a symbol of the 1960s, aroused in Bartley and his circle an almost irrational venom. According to Paul Greenberg, the Republican editorial page editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, "Just mention Arkansas or the Clintons to the *Wall Street Journal's* Bob Bartley, editor and gentleman, and his eyes narrow, his suspicions burgeon, his paranoia blooms like a mammoth magnolia ... and all systems are wildly Go!"

Journalist David Brock, author of a lengthy, salacious article in the right-wing *American Spectator* in December 1993 alleging sexual improprieties by both Clintons, once belonged to extreme right-wing circles and then repented. In an article in *Esquire* (April 1998) he apologized to Clinton. Brock asserted that Theodore Olson (the attorney who appeared for the Bush camp in the recent Supreme Court hearings), his wife Barbara and Kenneth Starr belonged to an informal "Get Clinton" group known as the "Olson Salon." (What might not have seemed so significant at the time jumps out at the reader of the *Journal's* Whitewater writings now—the urgency with which the Bartley editorial staff was campaigning in the summer of 1994 for the first Whitewater independent counsel, Robert Fiske, to be replaced, as he eventually was [by Starr] at the hands of a three-judge panel headed by the ultra-rightist David Sentelle.) According to Brock, the group also included *Journal* editor Bartley, federal appeals court judge Laurence Silberman, former judge Robert Bork, Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, *American Spectator* editor Emmett Tyrell and others.

Brock reported in *Esquire* that the "entire anti-Clinton establishment," including Bartley and Starr, gathered at the Olsons' wedding in the summer of 1996. Former marine colonel Oliver North was another guest. Former Bush White House counsel C. Boyden Gray (who resurfaced in the recent post-election crisis) allegedly told Brock that "it was up to

[Brock] to derail the Clinton juggernaut.” Brock subsequently wrote a book about Hillary Clinton that was not considered sufficiently vindictive by the “Olson salon.”

These are individuals with profoundly anti-democratic views. To attempt a coup d'état against a twice-elected president is entirely in keeping with their political ideas and histories. Bartley's *Wall Street Journal* took time out from the impeachment drive in October 1998 to come to the defense of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet when he was temporarily detained in Britain. The coup launched by the Chilean military in September 1973 against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, according to an October 20, 1998 *Journal* editorial, “saved his [Pinochet's] country.” The newspaper praised Pinochet, who presided over the torture and murder of thousands, for transforming Chile from “a Communist beachhead to an example of free-market reform.”

As Steve Rendall and Jim Naureckas of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) point out in their “20 Reasons Not to Trust the Journal Editorial Page,” Jude Wanniski, one of Bartley's former sidekicks at the *Journal* and a longtime associate, in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1988 claimed there was no evidence linking Salvadoran military officer and politician Roberto D'Aubuisson to death squads, and labeled reports to the contrary as “McCarthyist” and “one of the most successful propaganda hoaxes of the decade.” D'Aubuisson's well-known ties to death squads and to torture of political prisoners were confirmed by internal Reagan administration memos.

The *Journal's* brutality and bloodthirstiness surfaced in response to the slaughter of virtually defenseless Iraqi troops in the Persian Gulf War. In February 1991 Bartley's editorial page called on “America's elite, long at each other's throat,” to draw the lessons of the war: “Force is a legitimate tool of policy; it works.... America can lead, stop whining, think more boldly. Starting now.”

Pinochet and D'Aubuisson are political kindred spirits of Bartley and company. Were there a military or fascist takeover in the US, they would preside over or support the same sort of murderous political cleansing operation as their Latin American counterparts. A fanatical anti-socialist, Bartley views working people, minorities and others with scarcely concealed contempt. He once commented that in the US “there aren't any poor people, just a few hermits or something like that” (*Washington Post*, July 11, 1982).

In a recent *Journal* piece (“A Photo Finish, on Same Old Lines—It isn't culture that divides Americans. It's the welfare state,” December 11, 2000), Bartley commented that the November 7 election had been so close because “of a surge in voter turnout in bread-and-butter Democratic constituencies,” and he referred to “union households” and “blacks.” He continued: “Some may find this cynical, and like all useful theories it obviously oversimplifies. Yet the Republican half of our even division by and large represents the producers of wealth. And the Democratic half by and large represents recipients of government favors.” So speaks one of the chief representatives of Wall Street swindlers, thieves and parasites!

Bartley is treated as a respectable, if slightly cantankerous figure by the majority of the media, including its supposedly liberal elements. Indeed, Boylan of the *Columbia Journalism Review* makes the interesting observation that the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* formed a mutual admiration society in the early stages of the Whitewater story:

“Thus [in December 1993] began an extended period of dueling editorial pages—that is, of almost alternating editorials sounding the same melody but with different styles—the *Times* jazzier than usual, the *Journal* definitely rococo. Moreover, there was an unaccustomed spirit of harmony between Forty-third and Liberty streets [locales of the *Times* and *Journal* offices, respectively]. The *Journal* referred repeatedly and favorably to [*Times* reporter and Whitewater scandal-monger Jeff] Gerth's stories, and the *Times* reciprocated in its business pages with a profile of Bartley under the flattering headline A CONSERVATIVE'S STAR

SOARS ON WORDS ABOUT WHITEWATER, to which a *Journal* editorial responded in a courtly manner that ‘The *New York Times* has been both good on Whitewater and elsewhere recently generous to us.’

“An era of good feelings, indeed, and of near-obsession with Whitewater on both editorial pages. Between the onset in December 1993 and mid-August 1994, when the year's Whitewater congressional hearings ended, the *Journal* ran fifty Whitewater-related editorials that are included in its collection. In the same period, the *Times* printed at least forty editorials mentioning Whitewater. That is, those who had the stamina to read both papers had available an average of a Whitewater editorial every other day for six months.”

Elsewhere the liberal media are not much better. A 1997 report on PBS's *Media Matters* by David Remnick, *New Yorker* journalist and author, tamely described the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page as the “bulletin board” of “a dynamic new conservative press.”

After surveying Bartley's editorial record, this is the best that Remnick can bring himself to say: “Editorials are matters of opinion, and are not bound by the same rituals of even-handedness, the same standards, that define the best modern news reporting. But, while editorial writers are free to interpret the facts, they have to be careful not to ignore or distort them for the sake of ideology. As much as its readers admire the *Journal's* toughness, any editorial page needs to be intellectually tough on itself. The *Journal's* editorial page motto might as well be ‘all's fair in love and war.’ The editors and writers have adopted such an aggressive tone of voice, in part because they feel they must shout in order to be heard. Even now, with the newsstand packed with conservative papers and magazines, they see themselves as outnumbered and outgunned by their liberal brethren.” Remnick ends up, in fact, apologizing for Bartley.

Is it, in fact, permissible for an editorial page to lie “without consequence,” to smear opponents and destroy lives? And to engage in political provocations? The record of Bartley and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial writers as right-wing conspirators is clear to all those who care to examine it. Their social outlook and ambitions should be equally obvious.

Bartley and his colleagues are working assiduously toward the goal of subordinating all aspects of life in the US to the unrestricted drive for profit, a state of affairs that could only exist under conditions of authoritarian, police-state rule. The exposure and discrediting of the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial pages are necessary to the process of politically clarifying the American population and preparing it for the struggles that lie ahead.



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