

True to form, the Goodmans provide a fig leaf for the Democrats in Standing Up to the Madness

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Amy Goodman is well-known as the host of *Democracy Now!*, the independent news program broadcast on a variety of public radio and television channels, as well as the author or co-author of a number of books on political events. Her views are firmly located on the liberal left, with an orientation toward “left” elements in and around the Democratic Party, such as Rep. Dennis Kucinich, and the Greens.

David Goodman, Amy’s brother, has written for a number of left-liberal magazines including *Mother Jones* and the *Nation*, as well as more mainstream outlets such as the *Washington Post* and *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS.

Standing Up to the Madness begins with a well-known citation: “When fascism comes to America it will be wrapped in the American flag.” This saying, attributed to various people, has become something of a mantra in certain circles on the American left. The litany of complaints which follow—eroding civil liberties, increasingly stark economic divisions, the war in Iraq—are presented with no close examination. Each ill is viewed as having a single unifying cause, to wit: the Bush Administration.

No mention is made of the connection between the breakdown of democracy and the growth of social inequality, or between the predatory war aims of the US elite and the attacks on democratic rights at home. In a word there is no suggestion that the policies of the Bush administration reflect more than the “madness” of one individual or perhaps, at most, neo-conservative circles. The book never raises the larger question of the failure of the social and economic order, capitalism.

The question asked by the authors in the midst of it all is, “Where is the outrage?” To ask such a question is to insult the millions of people who have indeed expressed outrage, and who are suffering from the attacks described. By implicitly blaming the population for the lack of opposition to the assault on democratic rights the Goodmans shift attention away from the critical role played by the Democratic Party—the supposed opposition party—in enabling the rise to power of the Bush Administration through the hijacked 2000 election, the passage of the Patriot Act, the war on terror and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

In *Stop the Madness* the Goodmans seek to set out positive examples of citizens who have taken on the powers that be, “grassroots activists [who] have taken politics out of the hands of politicians,” in the words of a commentator. Such individuals may be courageous and sincere, but their efforts become part of a political argument the Goodmans are

constructing: these local, “grassroots” efforts obviate the need to challenge the overall political set-up and, specifically, to make a conscious break with the Democrats.

While few of the cases detailed in the book’s chapters will be new to listeners of *Democracy Now!*, since many of the subjects have appeared as interviewees on the show, there is value in reviewing the stories as part of a whole, in terms of painting a broader picture of the crisis and breakdown of American bourgeois democracy.

The first subject, Malik Rahim, of New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward provides special insight into what the residents of that area faced before, during and since hurricanes Katrina and Rita. It was through his and his neighbors’ efforts, along with an unexpected visit from a detachment of Veterans For Peace, that the area saw any relief in the initial aftermath of the storms. Unwilling to play games with people’s lives, he and his group offered help even to the racist vigilantes who had recently threatened them with violence.

Malik’s story is an anomaly in the book, as he is the only one who seems to have any sense of the history which brought his city to that desperate point. One of the founders of Common Ground Relief, a collective dating from the first few weeks after Katrina hit, Rahim and his neighbors are determined to salvage and rebuild whatever they can while offering help to others in the Gulf area. Of all the narratives in the book, his is the most affecting, and certainly the most dramatic.

While Rahim’s organization surely is doing good works, the area affected is far beyond the scope of any small organization to fix. The treatment of the survivors of Rita and Katrina continues to be abysmal, and resources continue to be lacking on the scale needed. Coming up on three years after the catastrophe, the people still face official stonewalling, constant threats to cut off what little aid they do receive and demonization by the press (not coincidentally around the expiration deadlines for aid packages).

The work of Common Ground is heartfelt and needed. However, it is not nearly enough. Rahim’s experience serves to point out the continuing neglect by the US government of pressing social needs as it pursues the war in Iraq and makes permanent tax cuts for the wealthiest citizens with bipartisan agreement.

The case presented in Chapter 3, “Librarians Unbound,” begins with a visit by two FBI agents to the office of the Library Connection of Connecticut (a consortium of 27 libraries that share a computer network). The agents were in possession of a “National Security Letter” (NSL) seeking “any and all subscriber information, billing information and access of any person or entity” using the library systems’ computers on February 15, 2005, between 2 and 2:45 p.m.

The executive director of the Library Connection, George Christian, noted in particular one clause stating that recipients of the letter could not disclose “to any person that the FBI has sought or obtained access to information or records.”

Christian, however, did tell a few people in the library system, and the executive committee met with its lawyer (an action that may very well not be legal under the draconian National Security Letter provision of the Patriot Act).

The librarians realized that they had two choices—either comply with the NSL, or sue. They elected to sue then-Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and engaged the national office of the ACLU to represent them. With their case, John Doe vs. Gonzales, they sought an injunction against being forced to comply with the National Security Letter, and launched a challenge to the constitutionality of the NSLs. Over the course of the trial, the librarians were required to keep mum and their names were only released inadvertently when a judge ordered the release of certain court documents.

As they do throughout the book, the Goodmans focus exclusively on the role of Bush when discussing the assault on civil liberties. We read, for example, that the Patriot Act was “rammed through a compliant Congress three months after the 9/11 attacks.” A page later: “When President Bush rammed the PATRIOT Act through a fearful Congress shortly after 9/11.” The complicity of Congress, and particularly the Democrats, in erasing the separation of powers and its leadership’s co-operation in passing and re-passing the sinister and authoritarian Patriot Act goes unmentioned except in terms of their supposedly being “forced” to comply.

In the chapter on American scientist James E. Hansen’s fight against official censorship of his findings on global warming, we are treated to a sub-chapter entitled “Showdown,” in which Rep. Henry Waxman, Democrat of California, is presented in the mold of Mr. Smith from the Frank Capra film “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington”—i.e., boldly challenging the powers that be on points of scientific freedom. Also featured are Reps. Peter Welch, Democrat of Vermont, and John Yarmuth, Democrat of Kentucky, both of whom are presented in a very positive light. The role of villain is played by Rep. Darrell Issa, Republican of California. Waxman is one of the Democratic Party’s leading frauds, a demagogue who issues subpoenas and stages hearings without serious consequences for anyone.

The Goodmans point out that both Bush and Cheney have deep connections to the oil industry. Unmentioned are the Democratic participants’ own backgrounds—for instance, Yarmuth’s previous career as both a Republican and as the heir to a family fortune derived in part from holdings in Ashland Oil Company. His current party affiliation, it seems, shields him from careful scrutiny by the Goodmans.

Hansen’s scientific career goes back decades, and the Office of Management and Budget had censored him during the previous Bush Administration. He also spoke about his disappointment with the Clinton administration in a January 2007 *Frontline* interview, stating that although the latter did not question the science, it did not do enough to act on the information provided, and noted that, “The United States’ portion of global emissions actually increased during the Clinton-Gore administration.”

The outcome of the more recent hearings into the Hansen case is left up in the air. While the authors note that certain low-level Bush loyalists involved lost their positions, there is no deeper analysis, with the chapter segueing into an account of the actions of author Bill

McKibben relating to his April 2007 “Step It Up Day,” and a variety of other “actions,” including Ted Glick’s “No War No Warming” non-violent civil disobedience action on Capitol Hill in October 2007,” which incorporated polar bear costumes and at which 61 people were arrested.

It is a peculiar transition, and the authors’ spotlighting impotent civil disobedience actions is a transparent attempt to focus the energies of the population on pressuring the Democratic Party and Congress.

The chapter ends with a quote from Al Gore’s Nobel Peace Prize speech: “We have everything we need to get started, save perhaps political will, but political will is a renewable resource. So let us renew it, and say together: ‘We have a purpose. We are many. For this purpose we will rise, and we will act.’”

Meanwhile, as noted on the WSWS April 30, 2008, the proposals from the Democratic presidential candidates on global warming “are no more serious [than Bush’s suggestions to open ANWAR to drilling, and a moratorium on domestic emissions targets]. In addition to the [gasoline] tax moratorium, Clinton is proposing a suspension of oil input into the Strategic Petroleum reserve, a marginal increase in spending on alternative energy sources, and an increase in fuel economy over a period of 20 years. Obama has rejected the tax moratorium on the grounds that companies would just increase their prices to make up the difference, and supports fuel economy standard increases and alternative energy investment.”

While *Standing up To the Madness* provides numerous stories illustrating the current assault on civil rights, its recommendations in no way add up to a viable policy to oppose war, racism and poverty. The “Conclusion,” entitled “We are the leaders we have been waiting for,” is made up of tepid and unserious propositions. In a subsection titled “Challenge the Corporate Media,” there is first a call to support the stations that air *Democracy Now!*, a passage which makes for embarrassing reading in its shameless self-promotion. It is then suggested that we “Post … stories, photos, and media at indymedia.org.”

We are urged to become active in the “national media reform movement”; web addresses are given for such entities as the identity politics-oriented Media Action Grassroots Network, as well as Free Press, which, while more even-handed, is still thoroughly reformist in its outlook and activity.

On page 288, the Goodmans write, “Democrats and Republicans alike have been served notice that lip service and deception will not satisfy the new generation of activists that is demanding real change, and real democracy.” Yet, there is neither a call for the building of a third, independent or socialist party, nor any critique of the capitalist profit system. There is, in short, no “or else” issued at all. The warning is proffered as an idle and impotent threat—one which reveals the role of the Goodmans as a pressure group on the Democratic Party.



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