

**DECEMBER 10**

# The P.U.litzer Prizes for 2004

**T**he P.U.-litzer Prizes were established a dozen years ago to provide special recognition for truly smelly media performances. As usual, I've conferred with Jeff Cohen, founder of the media watch group FAIR, to sift through the entries. And now, the 13th Annual P.U.-litzer Prizes, for the foulest media performances of 2004:

## **MANDATE MANIA: Too many winners to name**

It became a media mantra. Two days after the election, the Los Angeles Times reported that "Bush can claim a solid mandate of 51 percent of the vote." Cox columnist Tom Teepen referred to Bush's vote margin as an "unquestionable mandate." Right-wing pundit Bill Kristol argued that Bush's "mandate" went beyond the 49-states-to-one landslides of Nixon in 1972 and Reagan in 1984. Reality check: This was the narrowest win for an incumbent president since 1916. As Greg Mitchell wrote in Editor & Publisher: "Where I come from, 51 percent is considered a bare majority, not a comfortable margin. If only 51 percent of my family or my editorial staff think I am doing a good job, I might look to moderate my behavior, not repeat or enlarge it."

## **MEDIA BIGOT OF THE YEAR: MSNBC and radio host Don Imus**

On his Nov. 12 show, the day after Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat died, Imus said of Palestinians: "They're eating dirt and that fat pig wife of his is living in Paris." After an Imus colleague referred to Palestinians as "stinking animals" and said "they ought to drop the bomb right there, kill 'em all right now," Imus responded: "Well, the problem is we have (NBC reporter) Andrea (Mitchell) there; we don't want anything to happen to her." In February, when a civilian Iranian airliner crashed, killing 43 people, Imus reacted: "When I hear stories like that, I think 'Who cares?'" So much for showing the Islamic world we don't see all Muslims as enemies.

## **NO APOLOGY FOR BEING GULLIBLE AWARD: CBS anchor Dan Rather**

Asked at a Harvard forum in July what network TV news could have done better during

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the build-up to the Iraq war, Dan Rather said "more questions should have been asked" and then declared: "Look, when a president of the United States, any president, Republican or Democrat, says these are the facts, there is heavy prejudice, including my own, to give him the benefit of any doubt, and for that I do not apologize."

### **TIMIDITY RULES PRIZE: The Washington Post columnist David Ignatius**

Explaining why mainstream journalism failed to ask tough questions about the Iraq war before it started, columnist Ignatius – a war supporter – wrote in April: "In a sense, journalists were victims of their own professionalism. Because there was little criticism of the war from prominent Democrats and foreign policy analysts, journalistic rules meant we shouldn't create a debate on our own." Create a debate? Ignatius suggests it would have been unprofessional to raise questions at a time that many experts, over a hundred Congress members and millions of others were already questioning the drive to war.

### **"ONLY RIGHT-WING POLITICS THIS ELECTION YEAR" AWARD:**

#### **Disney's Michael Eisner**

In May, when Disney refused to distribute Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" documentary, CEO Michael Eisner said that Disney "didn't want to be in the middle of a politically-oriented film during an election year." But Disney was one of the 2004 election year's leading broadcasters of political propaganda, almost all of it pro-Bush, as its powerful talk radio stations served up hour after hour of right-wing hosts like Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Laura Ingraham, Matt Drudge, etc.

### **MEDIA MOGULS FOR BUSH PRIZE: Viacom CEO Sumner Redstone**

Seven weeks before the election, Sumner Redstone expressed support for Bush on behalf of his company, which owns CBS, UPN, MTV, VH1, Infinity radio and dozens of other subsidiaries: "From a Viacom standpoint, the election of a Republican administration is a better deal. Because the Republican administration has stood for many things we believe in, deregulation and so on." Days later, Redstone added: "I vote for Viacom. Viacom is my life, and I do believe that a Republican administration is better for media companies than a Democratic one." (Ironically, cultural conservatives often blame TV and radio sleaze on "The Liberal Media" – not GOP-backing media owners like Redstone and Rupert Murdoch.)

### **MOUTHPIECE FOR POWER AWARD: The Washington Post**

Give credit for candor to Karen DeYoung, former assistant managing editor, for this com-

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ment in an August report examining why the Washington Post marginalized prewar doubts about White House claims on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction: "We are inevitably the mouthpiece for whatever administration is in power. If the president stands up and says something, we report what the president said." If counter-arguments are put "in the eighth paragraph, where they're not on the front page, a lot of people don't read that far."

### **STENOGRAPHIC PRIDE AWARD: Judith Miller, The New York Times**

Defending her use of anonymous sources like Ahmed Chalabi, a highly unreliable Iraqi exile, in prewar front-page stories on Iraq's supposed WMDs, reporter Miller explained: "My job isn't to assess the government's information and be an independent intelligence agency myself. My job is to tell readers of The New York Times what the government thought about Iraq's arsenal." Miller did not explain how her job differs from being a PR agent for the U.S. government.

### **WINNING HEARTS AND LUNGS AWARD: Thomas Friedman, The New York Times**

In a Nov. 18 column datelined "Camp Fallujah, Iraq," columnist Friedman summed up the situation after the U.S. assault had left much of Fallujah in rubble: "Bottom line? Iraq is a country still on life support, and U.S. troops are the artificial lungs and heart." Apparently, the U.S. military needed to deprive the country of oxygen and blood in order to save it.

### **ORWELLIAN FORCES AWARD: Nic Robertson and others**

U.S. military spokespersons now describe those who attack U.S. soldiers in Iraq as "anti-Iraqi forces" – even though, by all documented accounts, the vast majority of those forces are actually Iraqis. And some American journalists have begun to make that newspeak their own, among them CNN's senior international correspondent Robertson. On Nov. 25, Robertson reported from "Camp Freedom in Mosul, where the troops go out in their Striker vehicles into the city of Mosul." He continued: "What they are doing has been conducting offensive operations to disrupt the anti-Iraqi forces."

### **OUTFOXING FOX PRIZE: Jack Cafferty, CNN**

As co-anchor of CNN's morning program, Cafferty had something to report on March 31: "It's a red-letter day here in America," he said. "Air America, that communist radio network, starts broadcasting in a little while." Cafferty was unyielding when CNN colleague Soledad O'Brien responded by saying that the new talk-radio network was not communist but liberal. He replied: "Well. Aren't they synonymous?"