

August 8, 2003

THE LIES OF TEXAS ARE UPON YOU

It is Friday. It's the middle of the summer. Just a ho-hum news day. More fog and precipitation in NYC, a glum ending to a sweaty wet week. There's been a tornado tossing mobile homes around in Florida, two Iraqis killed by US troops this time in Tikrit. A Palestinian "militant" shot down with his house demolished in Nablus (after killing an Israeli soldier); we have had Liberians welcoming "peacekeepers;" and the silly season is underway in California as the recall circus turns into a theater of the absurd. That's why it's time to tell a joke. "Finally, a candidate who can explain the Bush administration's positions on civil liberties in the original German," writes Comedian Bill Maher, in a Los Angeles Times op-ed piece explaining a potential selling point of Arnold Schwarzenegger. A "related" item comes in from Mary Ellen Churchill from San Francisco.

NAZI APPARITION RISING

"DID you see this about a Nazi apparition rising to the surface: The worst drought to hit eastern Europe since records began has resulted in the river Danube sinking to its lowest level since 1888. However in Prahovo, Serbia & Montenegro the river has divulged something more than just the normal collection of sand and silt. German warships, sunk to slow the advance of the Soviet Union's Black Sea fleet and afford the fleeing Nazi forces time to escape, have revealed themselves as the river lowered to an unheard of shallowness.

"Just last summer the Danube rose to the highest level recorded in decades and caused widespread flooding in central Europe.

"Most of the vessels which were scuppered by routed German forces have been partially revealed. There are thought to be 130 ships which were packed with explosives and detonated in this way, lain horizontally to block the advancing Soviet naval forces. Despite its age, many of the systems on board the most prominent vessel are still functioning and some particularly industrious souls have stripped electrical wiring from the ships for domestic use."

GORE ON DEMOCRACY SINKING

THOSE ships may have sunk a long time ago, but our democracy seems to be sinking now, too, at least according to Al Gore, who surfaced at a Moveon.org event at New York University. Reiterating that he is not planning to run again for President, he denounced Bush Administration "propaganda" and other policies. Said Mr. Al: "Millions of Americans now share a feeling that something pretty basic has gone wrong in our country and that some important American values are being placed at risk. And they want to set it right.

"The way we went to war in Iraq illustrates this larger problem. Normally, we Americans lay the facts on the table, talk through the choices before us and make a decision. But that didn't really happen with this war – not the way it should have. As

a result, too many of our soldiers are paying the highest price, for the strategic miscalculations, serious misjudgments, and historic mistakes that have put them and our nation in harm's way. I'm convinced that one of the reasons that we didn't have a better public debate before the Iraq War started is because so many of the impressions that the majority of the country had back then turn out to have been completely wrong."

He then cited those impressions but without clearly indicting the media mavens who accepted them uncritically and relayed them in the same way. In fact, he consciously avoided the subject saying: "Leaving aside for the moment the question of how these false impressions got into the public's mind..."

ON THE RANCH

THE propaganda and misimpressions Gore indicts remains with us. I was blown away by a story by Cheryl Seal about a place we frequently see in the news: President Bush's "ranch" in Crawford Texas. I had thought this was some old family homestead run by a man close to the land of his beloved Texas. Actually, it was earlier a pig farm and now it has become, according a piece I read on Democrats.com, a "set." Here's what they say and Cheryl uncovers:

"Have you seen all those article and pictures of Bush "at home on the ranch" in Crawford - the ones that imply that he is "just an ole ranch hand" more comfortable on the family homestead than in the "Big City," be it Austin or D.C.? Well, if you bought this image, you've been royally suckered. The Bush family homestead in Crawford is nothing more than an elaborate set. The house, built in 2000, was designed to be ready for Bush to step into - like a set awaiting an actor - during the

2000 presidential election. Not only was the "ranch" created in 2000 - so, essentially, was the "town" of Crawford! The original completion date of the house was November 7 - election day 2000. In other words, the curtain went up on the set on schedule for "show time." The very timing of this event indicates that Bush was absolutely confident that the election would be successfully engineered in his favor."

MANUFACTURING IMAGE

CHERYL Seal picks up the story that I have not seen explored on one TV report despite the hundreds of reporters who flock there. "Not only was the "ranch" created in 2000 - so, essentially, was the "town" of Crawford! Before then only about 400 people lived in the area. The Crawford Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture was formed shortly after the ranch was finished.

"The whole idea behind the ranch set, of course, was so that the public could be treated to footage of Bush seeking a quiet "retreat" at the family ranch. Americans would thus assume that the ranch was a rooted family homestead or compound like the one Kennedys had in Martha's Vineyard or FDR had at Campobello. But when Bush retreated into his "homestead" in November, 2000, he was merely walking onto a prepared set upon which the paint had barely dried, let alone even the barest of roots put down! When we see photos of Bush bombing around the ranch in his leather jacket in his "ole pickup," supposedly knowing every tree and bush - it's all pure fantasy!

"Until Bush and his handlers decided that a rural ranch would be a slick bit of PR for the presidential campaign, Bush had no interest in a "home on the range." Instead, his preferred week-

end retreat was to the Rainbow Club, an exclusive lakeside hunting club in Henderson County, about an hour south of Dallas, much closer to the comforts of Austin. When a Bush run for president began to look like a pretty good bet, the 1,600 acres were bought and the Bushes started making weekend trips to a 60-year-old ranch house that existed on the property – not of course, before refurbishing it! – so they could build the “lore” that would take in the American public, hook, line and sinker.”

LIBERIA SINKING

ON BBC this morning, I watched Liberians welcome the arrival of peacekeepers who have yet to penetrate into rebel areas. Charles Taylor, that country’s President, had now formally resigned. On the surface, it looked like all was going well until I came across this story in the Mail and Guardian out of Johannesburg. An African paper was telling another story: “Liberian rebels and government soldiers, some aged 12 or even younger, are assaulting thousands of girls and women under the cover of war, aid workers said yesterday. More than 600 rapes have been documented in Monrovia since July, but that is thought to be a small fraction of the real figure.” Meanwhile the New York Times carries an op-ed by Kenneth Crain who urges President Bush to send in the marines. He writes: Counting on regional forces to bring peace to Liberia without American participation is a mistake likely to have tragic consequences.”

PROTESTING POLICE CONDUCT

ANOTHER Times story that caught my eye today harkened back to the anti-war protests in

New York where demonstrators were kept in pens and otherwise harassed in Michael Bloomberg’s Manhattan. Reports the Times: “a federal judge in Manhattan criticized police officials yesterday for the way demonstrators against the war in Iraq were interrogated earlier this year, and he made clear that civil liberties lawyers could seek to hold the city in contempt of court in the future if the police violate people’s rights.” This “justice” only took five months. Not bad.

UPDATE

I WROTE about Hiroshima earlier in the week. (Tomorrow the Japanese city of Nagasaki, which was also nuked, holds its annual commemoration.) On August 6th, the Mayor of Hiroshima made a speech marking the 58th anniversary of the bombing of his city. It wasn’t exactly page-one news, yet it deserves to be noted. AP reports: “The mayor of Hiroshima has criticized the U.S. for pursuing new nuclear weapons technology, as he marked the 58th anniversary of the world’s first atomic bomb attack. Tadatashi Akiba said Washington’s apparent worship of “nuclear weapons as God” was threatening world peace.

“The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the central international agreement guiding the elimination of nuclear weapons, is on the verge of collapse,” Akiba said during the annual ceremony held Wednesday at the Peace Memorial Park. As the U.S.-British-led war on Iraq made clear, the assertion that war is peace is being trumpeted as truth.

EHRENREICH AS ANTI-CHRIST IN NORTH CAROLINA

IN the freedom of expression department, author Barbara Ehrenreich, a brilliant writer on economic

and social issues, talks about the response to her book, “Nickel and Dimed,” just received on the campus of a North Carolina university. Says Ehrenreich: “On July 10, a group of conservative UNC-CH students, calling themselves the Committee for a Better Carolina, held a press conference, along with a handful of right-wing state legislators, to denounce “Nickel and Dimed” as a ‘classic Marxist rant’ and a work of ‘intellectual pornography with no redeeming characteristics.’”

Ehrenreich continues: “Fine, at least I could cling to the adjectives “classic” and “intellectual.” But when I read the full page ad the Committee for a Better Carolina had taken out in the Raleigh News and Observer, I saw that this controversy was less about the book than it was about me.

“The ad charged me with being a Marxist, a socialist, an atheist, and a dedicated enemy of the American family – this last confirmed by a citation from the Heritage Foundation on my longstanding conviction that families headed by single mothers are as deserving of support as those headed by married couples. I was greeted on North Carolina radio talk shows by hosts asking, ‘What does it feel like to be the Antichrist in North Carolina?’ and similarly challenging inquiries.”

TURN YOUR RADIO OFF

IN our media news this a.m., two stories about radio. Hendrik Hertzberg writes in the New Yorker about the lack of diversity on the airwaves in New York, the so-called capital of liberal media: “Political talk radio here is dominated by the hard right. On the AM band, whose low-fidelity signal is perfect for shrill jabber, no fewer than four powerful stations feature “conservative talk.” Two of them, WMCA and WWDJ, are “Christian” and

heavily salted with attacks on homosexuality, abortion rights, and stem-cell research and support for school prayer, President Bush’s judicial nominees, and Israeli maximalism. The other two pump out a steadier flow of viscous, untreated political sewage.

“WOR carries four hours daily of Bob Grant and Bill O’Reilly, reliable voices of irritable reaction. The biggie is WABC, which claims the largest talk-radio audience in the country. The station features fifteen hours a week of Limbaugh, fifteen of Sean Hannity, and ten of Mark Levin (“one of America’s preeminent conservative commentators”). It recently dropped the malignant ranter Michael Savage, not because he told a “sodomite” caller, ‘You should only get Aids and die, you pig’ (that happened a little later, on Savage’s short-lived MSNBC cable-television show), but over a contract dispute. (Savage’s photograph remains on the home page of the WABC Web site, like Banquo’s ghost.) As its call letters indicate, WABC carries the respectable imprimatur of the American Broadcasting Company, which owns it and provides its hourly newscasts, and, by extension, of ABC’s parent company, Disney.

“What is the appeal of this type of radio? “The radiocons seldom offer analysis or argument. To the chronically resentful, they offer the sadistic consolation of an endless sneer at weaklings, victim-group whiners, cultural snobs, Hollywood hypocrites whose hearts bleed for the downtrodden though they themselves are rich and privileged, feminists, environmentalists, and, of course, ‘liberals,’ defined as the Clintons, other members of the ‘Democrat Party,’ and persons suspected of thinking that the state ought to help correct for various kinds of unfairnesses or calamities (economic, racial, climatic, medical) or of attaching

MEDIA DIARY DANNY SCHECHTER

themselves to some identity other than or in addition to “American” (black, gay, foreign, all humanity). By contrast, most noncons, most people, for that matter, do not regard politics as entertainment. They regard it as politics.”

Dave Goodman sends along an item by Clea Simon from the Boston Globe reporting about WJUL in Lowell, Mass: “Change is coming to the radio station at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, WJUL-FM (91.5). Whether that change is for good or ill depends very much on which side of the control board you sit. At issue is the con-

tract, announced last week, between the university and Lowell’s daily newspaper, The Sun. Under the pact, the paper will produce a morning news-magazine show focusing on local issues, “Sun Rise,” which will launch during the first week of September and will air weekdays from 5 to 10 a.m. The Sun will also build a new studio for the station and contribute \$40,000 annually toward a paid position at the station, in part to handle marketing.” Media activists and staffers say this move will narrow diverse expression and give more air-time to a corporate media outlet.

