

September 5, 2003

9/11 AND THE VIACOMESE

This has been a week of “oops, sorry” as so called “policy shifts” make for other embarrassing about faces for politicians who have had to back down. It is happening to the FCC which has not given up yet, but was clobbered again, this time by the Senate on the media mogul enhancement act that it wants to impose on media consumers. More on that in a second. Bush judicial nominee Manuel Estrada has been sent packing because the Senate refuses to be bullied by the Bushies on that front. There has been a shift with the North Koreans. Now the administration says it wants to “help them:” not bomb them. In Hong Kong, the controversial article 23 security law has been withdrawn after months of popular protest, and at the UN and on other fronts the administration’s tough guy act seems to be wearing thin. Paul Krugman writes in the Times today:

“All the world knows about the Iraq about-face: having squandered our military strength in a war he felt like fighting even though it had nothing to do with terrorism, President Bush is now begging the cheese-eaters and chocolate-makers to rescue him. What may not be equally obvious is that he’s doing the same thing on the economic front. Having squandered his room for economic maneuver on tax cuts that pleased his party base but had nothing to do with job creation, Mr. Bush is now asking China to help him out.”

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

MR. RUMSFELD is being squired around Iraq under heavy guard to see first hand how bad it is, and the US is claiming victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan. Again. I thought we bombed them back to the Stone Age and beyond. The Democratic candidates seem to be discovering some of those stones and went after the Republicans last night at their “debate” in New Mexico rather than at each other.

REMEMBERING 9-11

MEANWHILE President Bush has been issuing proclamations to commemorate the second anniversary of 9/11. Yesterday Austrian TV was in to ask me what I really thought happened, suggesting that, in Europe at least deep suspicions and the rumblings of conspiracy theories are picking up steam. I even had a call from a friend in Thailand who expressed the concern that critics here will lean more to the incompetence theory than the suggestion that it was a plot. This is the old conflict between the “conspiracy theory of history” vs. the “fuck-up theory.” Question: can’t we have a blend of both?

I have been reporting on a new movie that airs on SHOWTIME this weekend that defies President Bush. DC 9 11: Time of Crisis is the name of the docudrama. After watching an advance copy, I began investigating the back story. Showtime’s publicity people have snagged a big spread in the

New York Times today. I am not sure they will be happy with the actual content but many PR people believe a picture is worth more than a thousand words and that controversy will bring eyeballs to the small screen.

Allesandra Stanley writes: “This made-for-television movie on Showtime Sunday night is less a first draft of history than a final rewrite of a Tom Clancy screenplay. George W. Bush, uncannily impersonated by Timothy Bottoms, is its action-adventure commander in chief. “If some tinhorn terrorist wants me, tell him to come get me,” the fictionalized president barks at an overprotective security officer keeping him hidden aboard Air Force One on that fateful day. “I’ll just be waiting for the bastard.” Did this happen? The source for this and other quotes in the movie come from a hardly disinterested participant: President Bush himself.

NO ONE WANTS TO DISCUSS IT!

I HAD no idea about how much visibility this deceptive dreck was being given until Jackie Newberry wrote me after I sent her my piece: “I watched The View this a.m. and heard Tim Hutton (he plays dimbulb) fawn over the Pres and say that this was all accurate because it was based on documents. His daughter encouraged him to play the role because, “The President really needs your help.” The women on The View are more progressive than believing that pap. I’ve been sending it to Buzzflash, Undernews, Wolf Blitzer, Howard Kurtz, Hardball, Buchanan and Press. This is great. And pitiful. I heard someone on Democracy Now today said it’s time that we stopped focusing on how stupid these people are and start discussing how vicious they are. The guy at the

Wash Post, Loeb, needs to see this. And Ted K and Peter Jennings. They are talking more straight these days. Paula Zahn and Bill Hemmer are beyond help. They always say how CNN spoke the truth during the war.”

(Well, needless to say, my phone is not exactly lighting up with news outlets anxious to expose this latest TV travesty pumping up the prez. – DS)

I’ve featured parts of my probe in this space. While the whole investigation is now available, there is a part of it that has interest value separate and apart from 9/11 and the reselling of Bush. That involves the role of the media companies especially Viacom, the company known for its “hipness” and edgy MTV programming. It is Viacom that is running this program on its Showtime Channel and funded it, in part. I wondered why, given their image. Here’s part of what I found:

THE VIACOMESE NATION

YEARS ago, a friend working at MTV invited me to lunch and pointed to a corner of the Lodge, the in-house restaurant overlooking Times Square that catered to employees. “That’s where THEY sit,” she told me, “The Viacomese.” In her eyes, and in the eyes of the other MTV kids, their corporate controllers were a nation apart, a world of number crunchers and merger-prone maniacs.

And the leader of their pack is 80-year-old Sumner Redstone, a lawyer-turned-theater-owner-turned-media-mogul who lives the “big is better” philosophy of media power:

“I saw the consolidation of power taking place in the media industry,” he said. “This global race will go to the swift and the strong. And Viacom, as we have repeatedly demonstrated, is among the swiftest of the strongest.”

Months earlier, in April 2001, Powell’s FCC gave

Viacom, “the swiftest and the strongest,” a big present in the form of a ruling, by a 3-1 vote that allowed the company to keep both CBS and United Paramount Network (UPN). To do so, the FCC also voted to relax a portion of its broadcast-network ownership rules. This experience showed Viacom how important the government could be to its business ambitions.

Viacom’s top executives rarely advertise their political leanings – but liberal is not a term that comes to mind. Company founder Sumner Redstone, a billionaire famous for saying it’s ‘not about the money, it is about winning’ was in military intelligence in World War II. A New Englander, he has been aligned with middle-of-the-road Democratic politicians like Ed Muskie. In 2000, he helped raise money for Al Gore. And now he boosts the man who “beat” him. But making money remains his first love. And spreading Viacom’s programming and power globally has been one of his personal passions.

China is one market he is cultivating. On Sept. 28, 1999, in the midst of China’s fierce crackdown on the Falun Gong spiritual movement, Sumner Redstone was in Shanghai for a conference hosted by Time Warner-owned Fortune magazine and keynoted by President Jiang. To the delight of the Beijing government, Redstone called for American press restraint in the coverage of China: “As they expand their global reach, media companies must be aware of the politics and attitudes of the governments where we operate. Journalistic integrity must prevail in the final analysis. But integrity should not be exercised in a way that is unnecessarily offensive to the countries in which you operate.”

And why does Redstone counsel against aggressive media exposure of abuses in China? Because

Viacom is making money there. How much? He told an investment conference on September 10, 2001, a day before the terrorist attacks. “In China, our revenues will be up around 40% this year. And they’re doubling every few years. During this trip, I met with every important minister in China. I met with Minister Xu and Minister Ding, who oversee the entertainment industry. On my last day, I had lunch with Dr. Jiang, the president’s son, who is a great friend and supporter. And at the end of the trip I met with the president of China, Jiang Zemin. They were fruitful meetings, and we expect to be able to announce agreements in the near future to expand our distribution in China.” Go to the [Mediachannel.org](http://www.Mediachannel.org) to read this whole enchilada.

FYI – Viacom-Showtime’s blurb on the film is online. You can count the number of ex-Trekkies in the cast if that amuses you.

http://www.sho.com/movies/movies_product.cfm?titleid=119354

BATTLING MEGAMEDIA

THE big news yesterday was the actions of a Senate Committee which blasted the FCC just a day after the Federal Appeals Court put the rule change in suspended animation. Steve Labaton reported in the Times: “A Senate committee today unanimously approved a spending measure with a provision that would block a rule allowing the nation’s largest television networks to grow bigger by buying more stations.

The decision by the Senate Appropriations Committee moved the Republican-controlled Congress a big step closer to a rare rebuke of both the Bush administration and the Federal Communications Commission. The lopsided vote - only one member of the committee spoke against the

provision - makes it likely that the measure will be approved by the full Senate. The White House says-for now-it is not backing down and wants to “work with Congress.”

PRESSURE FROM BELOW PUSHES CHANGE FROM ABOVE

BUT this is not primarily a Congressional story or a judicial one. It is a people’s movement out there leading the charge as John Nichols reported in *The Nation* after the Court ruled.

“Most of the focus of the broad-based opposition to the FCC rule changes has been on Congress, which has been inundated with hundreds of thousands of calls, emails and letters from Americans who want to prevent media consolidation. Activists tend to believe that Congressional action will ultimately be needed to block the rule changes. But the appeals court decision to stay implementation of the rule changes provides breathing room for those seeking to prevent a new wave of media consolidations at both the national and local levels. And the fact that the decision of the appeals court was unanimous suggests that legal strategies could prove to be more significant than initially expected.

“Those who have battled the FCC ownership rule changes on multiple fronts hailed the decision as a dramatic breakthrough. Though the court victory may only be temporary, US Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, said, “The decision of the Third Court of Appeals is a major victory for the American people who, in my view, do not want to see media in America owned by a smaller and smaller number of huge multi-media corporations. This decision will give Congress time to pass legislation that will substantially increase

media diversity, protect localism and allow for more competition.”

The Philadelphia-based Prometheus Project has played a leadership role in advocating for the development of low-power community radio stations. Arguing before the appeals court this week, lawyers for the group made the case that the ability to broadcast would be harmed by the expansion of already dominant media conglomerates. Samuel Spear, an attorney for Prometheus, said the group sought the judicial review because the rule changes would allow “the big media companies to grow bigger and to monopolize the industry more.”

City Paper reports that Attorney General Ashcroft has instituted a print journalist ban on his national tour promoting the Patriot Act. Howard Altman’s piece appears on CityPaper.net via Free Press (MediaReform.net)

<http://www.mediareform.net/news.php?id=1041>

COVERING THE RECALL

EVEN as splits among Republicans in California seem to be making a Democratic victory there more likely, Nikki Finke, a most informed columnist on the inner life of Hollywood writes in the *LA Weekly* about the Arnoldo angle. “It’s not shocking that sex would surface in this post-Clinton gubernatorial recall election – especially given the movie star’s penchant for baring his butt and simulating coitus for the camera. After all, we remain fixated on everything in the entertainment industry that’s most sensational or scandalous because it’s the unifying prism through which we view the world, from Britney tongue-kissing Madonna, to Denzel’s and Halle’s Best Actor Oscars, to Robert Downey Jr.’s addiction saga.

“But what is surprising right now is the continuing way that the media coverage remains muffled about each new explosive Arnold revelation. Not just the political bomb that he boasted about a gangbang and drug taking in a 1977 Oui magazine interview. It’s also the orgy he described in a 1981 Penthouse interview, the groping and fondling ascribed to him by a 2001 Premiere magazine interview, his Nazi father’s real wartime activities unearthed by the Los Angeles Times last month, the broken campaign promises he made in recent weeks, and then, last weekend’s report of alleged racist statements.

“All of this smacks of celebrity worship or semi-collusion with Schwarzenegger’s Republican campaign (demonstrating just how monolithic Big Media’s POV really is despite the FCC’s recent claims to the contrary). It’s also a case of squeamishness on the part of men (who don’t see a gangbang as any big deal whereas for women it’s another minefield in the Mars/Venus battle of the sexes). Certainly it’s not stupidity deserving a pass (especially since the same forces snuffing out Arnold’s 25-year-old outrageous past are fanning the flames of Cruz Bustamante’s long-ago collegiate affiliation with MEChA).”

BRITISH JOURNALIST INDICTS BRITISH PRESS

AS we complain about the passivity and lack of aggressiveness in the US press, over in Britain Polly Toynbee, who seems to enjoy being a contrarian indicts her own colleagues as “a vicious press pack which ultimately might make the country ungovernable.” She writes in The Guardian:

“Journalism has become obsessed with the processes of government, but incurious about any

complex problem that cannot be blamed upon some hapless minister. What drove Downing Street mad was when it saw this start to leak into corners of the BBC too. The trouble is that a generation of young journalists now know nothing else, bred on the idea that attack is the only sign of journalistic integrity - all politicians are villains, all journalists their natural predators, or else toadies and lackeys. Speaking at a rather gentle literary festival recently, a young chap asked me a particularly aggressive question. Afterwards he came and apologized, explaining he was a trainee journalist learning to ask rude questions: he intuited nastiness is what it takes. In some newsrooms he’s probably right.”

Say what you will, many British reporters are digging out stories that have yet to be taken seriously in our media. Here’s a report, for example from Iraq by David Swift in the Daily Express: “Soldiers and civilians in Iraq face a health time bomb after dangerously high levels of radiation were measured around Baghdad. Levels between 1,000 and 1,900 times higher than normal were recorded at four sites around the Iraqi capital where depleted uranium (DU) munitions have been used across wide areas.”

RESOURCES OF VALUE

MY colleague Esti Marpet sent along a piece from Foreign Policy Magazine that very carefully reprises and reviews the case for war in Iraq in light of what we now know: “In an effort to quell the controversy over the “16 words” in U.S. President George W. Bush’s State of the Union address, the White House declassified and released intelligence documents on July 18, 2003 to prove there was ample evidence that Saddam Hussein had a continuing and expanding nuclear weapons pro-

MEDIA DIARY DANNY SCHECHTER

gram. Yet those same documents indicate that some senior officials had serious doubts about the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the regime's links to al Qaeda." To check it out, visit this site:"

<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/index.html>

The new issue of the Columbia Journalism Review features a special report on the growth and vitality of the alternative media. It seems as if the mainstream media monitors are finally discovering that there is more to cover than the New York Times. CJR offers this preview: "We weigh the significance of the blogging phenomenon, low-power FM, and other emerging media, and calculate how such alternatives alter the power relationship between press and people."

Our colleague Polar Levine writes about the new Mel Gibson movie on the crucifixion on popcultmedia.com: "Fox has passed on its first-

right-of-refusal option to distribute Mel Gibson's controversial film focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus. Unlike the Murdoch Empire's other creative offerings in the world of entertainment and infotainment, the Gibson opus apparently lacked sufficient fairness and balance for The Big Man's taste (Rupert's, that is). The director's radical Catholic reading of the event depicts the ancient Church view that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of their lord. Even the Catholic Church has, at least for public relations purposes, let go of its anti-Semitic spin on the execution." When you check it out, don't miss a headline worthy of that day on the cross: "JEWS CREWS SPEW BLUES WHILE MEL'S VIEWS RATTLE THE PEWS. HE STEWS, PAYS SOME DUES, DESPERATE FOR VENUES AND GOOD REVIEWS. THE FEET OF THIS FISHERMAN TOO BIG FOR HIS SHOES: The Passions of Mel Gibson"

