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NEWS | NEWS COVER 06.04.03

Weapons Of Mass Stupidity

Fox News hits a new lowest common denominator

BY HAL CROWTHER It's the inviolable first rule of democracy that all politicians will praise the wisdom of the people -- an effusive flattery that intensifies when they ask "the people" to swallow something exceptionally inedible. What the people never hear from anyone, or from anyone with further ambitions, is the truth. If a public figure wishes to leave the stage forever, a sound strategy is to offer his fellow citizens a candid and disparaging assessment of their intelligence. In the aftermath of the conquest of Iraq, as we awake to the bewildering possibility of a United States of Asia, the patriotic pageantry and premature gloating call to mind an obsession that once gripped the great French novelist Gustave Flaubert. (In my recklessness I ignore the halfwit embargo on all things French.) Flaubert, according to W.G. Sebald, became convinced that his own work and his own brain had been infected by a national epidemic of stupidity, a relentless tide of gullibility and muddled thinking which made him feel, he said, as if he were sinking into sand.

At his low point, Flaubert convinced himself that everything he had written had been contaminated and "consisted solely of a string of the most abysmal errors and lies." Sometimes he lay on his couch for months, frozen with the dread that anything he wrote would only extend Stupidity's domain. Flaubert became a scholar of moronic utterances, painstakingly collecting hundreds of what he called *betises* -- stupidities -- and arranging them in his "Dictionary of Received Opinions."

The wondrous blessing God bestowed on Gustave Flaubert -- and on America's own great chroniclers of contagious stupidity, Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken -- is that they lived and died without imagining a thing like Fox News. It's easy to laugh at Rupert Murdoch's outrageous mongrel, the impossible offspring of supermarket tabloids, sitcom news spoofs, police-state propaganda mills and the World Wrestling Federation.

Fox News is an oxymoron and Cheech and Chong would have made a more credible team of war correspondents than Geraldo Rivera and Ollie North. Neither *Saturday Night Live* nor the 1973 film *Network*, Paddy Chayefsky's corrosive satire of TV news, could even approach the comic impact of Geraldo embedded, or of Fox's pariah parade, its mothball fleet of experts who always turn out to be disgraced or indicted Republican refugees. If Ed Meese, Newt Gingrich and Elliott Abrams couldn't fill your sails with mirth, you could count on the recently deposed Viceroy of Virtue and High Regent of Rectitude, my old schoolmate Blackjack Bill Bennett.

With its red-faced, hyperventilating reactionaries and slapstick

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abuse of lame "liberal" foils who serve them as crash dummies, Fox News could easily be taken as pure entertainment, even as inspired burlesque of the rightwing menagerie. But the problem -- in fact, the serious problem - is that Fox isn't kidding, and brownshirts aren't funny.

Harper's reports that Fox commentator Bill O'Reilly became so infuriated by the son of a 9-11 victim who opposed the war -- "I'm against it and my father would have been against it, too" -- that he cursed the man and even threatened him off-camera. A Fox TV anchor, one Neil Cavuto, celebrated the fall of Baghdad by informing all of us who opposed the war in March, "You were sickening then, you are sickening now." If reports are accurate, these troubled men are neither bad journalists nor even bad actors portraying journalists -- they're mentally unbalanced individuals whose partisan belligerence is pressing them to the brink of psychosis.

But the scariest thing about Fox and Rupert Murdoch, the thing that renders them all fear and no fun in a time of national crisis, is that they channel for the Bush administration as faithfully as if they were on the White House payroll. Like no other substantial media outlet in American history, Fox serves -- voluntarily -- as the propaganda arm of a controversial, manipulative, image-obsessed government. To watch its war coverage for even a minute was to grind your teeth convulsively at each Orwellian repetition of the Newspeak mantra, "Operation Iraqi Freedom." I swear I hate to stoop to Nazi analogies; but if Joseph Goebbels had run his own cable channel, it would have been indistinguishable from Fox News.

Fox's truculent patriotism is misleading, of course. Rupert Murdoch is not exactly an American patriot, he's not even exactly an American. Though he became an American citizen in 1985 (solely to qualify, under US law, as the owner of a TV network), the Australian Murdoch was already 54 and his tabloid formula had already polluted the media mainstreams in Australia and Great Britain. Murdoch is an insatiable parasite, a vampirish lamprey who fastens himself to English-speaking nations and grows fat on their cultural lifeblood, leaving permanently degraded media cultures in his wake. Rabid patriotism is a product he sells, along with celebrity gossip, naked women and smirky bedroom humor, in every country he contaminates. And a little "white rage" racism has always gone into his mix for good measure. ("He tried so hard to use race to sell his newspapers that he became known as "Tar Baby' Murdoch," Jimmy Breslin once charged.)

Murdoch's repulsive formula has proven irresistible from Melbourne to Manhattan, and now, by satellite, he's softening up Beijing. His great fortune rests on his wager that a huge unevolved minority is stupid, bigoted, prurient, nasty to the core. In America today, it's hard to say whether Rupert Murdoch is an agent, or merely a beneficiary, of the cultural leprosy that's consuming us. But the conspicuous success of Fox News, lamentable in the best of times, is devastating in a shell-shocked nation that sees itself at war.

It is and has always been true, in Samuel Johnson's famous words, that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" -- by which, of course, Dr. Johnson meant patriotism as a political and rhetorical weapon, not as a private emotion. Belittling other people's patriotism to achieve political leverage is the lowest road a public scoundrel can travel, the road where neo-conservative meets neo-fascist. In flag-frenzied Fox, an unscrupulous administration found a blunt object ready-made to hammer its critics.

Liars With Secret Agendas

Years ago in Moscow, at the dawn of perestroika, a pair of Russian journalists showed me headlines from the *New York Post* that made Khrushchev's "We will bury you" sound like "Have a nice day." How

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can there ever be peace, they asked me, if America hates us so much? Handicapped by the yawning gap between our respective press traditions, I tried to explain that the *Post* had nothing to do with our government or even the American media machine, that it was owned by an Australian whose Red-baiting and saber-rattling was an act designed to sell newspapers to morons. That he was unconnected to our government was something I believed about Murdoch in 1984, though no doubt Ronald Reagan was eager to naturalize a lonely immigrant with billions to invest in right-wing media.

But now? Is it sheer coincidence that the president's stage manager, Greg Jenkins -- responsible for the notorious flight-suit landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln, and for posing George Bush against Mt. Rushmore and the Statue of Liberty -- was recently a producer at Fox News?

If these elaborate tableaux Jenkins choreographs for President Bush seem clumsy, tasteless, condescending and insulting to your intelligence, you must be some kind of liberal. They bear an uncanny family resemblance to the red-white-and-blue show at Fox News, and heavy-handedness has never harmed *its* ratings, nor the president's either.

How stupid are we, finally, how easy to fool? Fox News is run by the insidious Roger Ailes -- image merchant for Nixon, Reagan and Bush senior, producer for Rush Limbaugh, newsman never -- and Fox is not what it seems to be. It's not a news service, certainly, nor even the sincere voice of low-rent nationalism. It's a calculated fraud, like the president who ducked the draft during Vietnam, and even welshed on his National Guard commitment, but who puts on a flight suit stenciled "Commander-in-chief" and plays Douglas MacArthur on network TV.

"I almost choked," said my mother's friend Doris, who's 90. "I had to lie down." It's possible that even old George Bush, who served with distinction in World War II, had to stifle a groan over that one.

The invasion of Iraq was in no way what it seemed to be, either. Saddam Hussein was never a threat to the United States. His "weapons of mass destruction" remain invisible, his terrorist connections remain unproven, and he had absolutely nothing to do with the destruction of the World Trade Center. Most cynical of all was the "liberation" lie, the administration's sudden concern for the helpless citizens of Iraq. Saddam, as grotesque as he was, wasn't getting any meaner, and "liberators" like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney were doing brisk business with him when he was in his murderous, citizen-eating prime (and in Cheney's case, as recently as 1999). It would take half a page to list all the US-sanctioned dictators, killers of their people, who will be sharing hell's hottest corner with Saddam Hussein.

Liars with secret agendas are treating Americans like frightened children. If that sounds like a cry from the Left, get a transcript of Sen. Robert Byrd's remarks to the Senate on May 21. Byrd, nobody's liberal by any stretch of the imagination, accuses the White House of constructing "a house of cards, built on deceit," to justify its war on Iraq.

According to polls, at least half of us were so eager to be deceived, we believed the one lie Bush never dared to tell us, except by implication: that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

According to a CNN poll, 51 percent believe this -- "The Moron Majority," declares the headline in *The Progressive Populist*. And at that point, like poor Flaubert, I feel the sand around my ankles. I want to lie down and give up. On the wall above my bed of pain, two familiar quotations: "The tyranny of the ignoramuses is insurmountable and assured for all time" -- Albert Einstein; and "Perhaps the universe is nothing but an equilibrium of idiocies." -- George Santayana.

It violates democratic etiquette to call your fellow citizens "idiots." (Unless they're liberals -- "We all agree that liberals are stupid," writes Charles Krauthammer.) Fortunately, the PC wordworks has coined a new euphemism to replace the ugly word "retarded." It's "intellectually disabled," and we have it just in time. How else could we describe a majority that accepts the logic of "supporting the troops"? Protest as I might, a local columnist explained to me, once the soldiers are "locked and cocked" I owe them not only my prayers for their safe deliverance but unqualified endorsement of their mission, no matter how immoral and ill-advised it may seem to me.

According to this woeful logic, whoever controls the armed forces in the country where you live owns your conscience and your soul. It mandates unanimous civilian support for King Herod's soldiers smashing Hebrew babies against doorposts. It holds our soldiers hostage to silence our common sense, independent judgment and moral autonomy -- the foundations of each thinking individual's self-respect, not to mention the foundations of every theory of democratic government.

"To announce that there must be no criticism of the president, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public," said President Theodore Roosevelt.

The Madhouse Choir

They don't make Republicans like they used to. The troop-support doctrine, so universally and smugly conceded, is logic for the intellectually disabled, for people who've been hit in the head repeatedly with a heavy shovel. The stupidity of those who buy it is no more astonishing than the hypocrisy of those who sell it -- Republicans who preach our sacred duty to the army's morale and simultaneously cancel \$15 billion in veteran's benefits and 60 percent of federal education subsidies for servicemen's children. If you can't believe that, look it up.

When is it too late to wake the sleeping masses? When a Fox TV show for amateur entertainers turns up more voters than Congressional elections? The marriage of television and propaganda may well have been the funeral of reason. In the meantime, Iraq is a bloody mess and Afghanistan a tragic mess, and most of the earth's one billion Muslims think the US and Israel are trying to conquer their world and destroy their religion. America's economy is suffocating ("A sickly economy with no cure in sight" says this morning's paper), her currency is in free fall and her reputation flies below half mast on every continent. We've been instructed to hate the French, our allies since the days of Lafayette, because they dared to tell us the truth.

What our best friends think of us is epitomized by a new play in Paris titled *George W. Bush, or God's Sad Cowboy*. Another in London is called *The Madness of George Dubya*. Our only original enemies, the terrorists of Al-Qaeda, seem to be thriving -- and quite naturally gaining recruits. There's a chilling suspicion that major architects of our current foreign policy are insane. Listen to Bush adviser Richard Perle, known since his Reagan years as the Prince of Darkness: "If we let our vision of the world go forth, and we embrace it entirely, and we don't try to piece together clever diplomacy *but just wage total war*, (my italics) our children will sing great songs about us years from now."

Is that the children I hear singing, or the madhouse choir? (Calling Dr. Strangelove. . .) But polls tell us that through all the wars and lies and logical meltdowns that followed 9-11, 70 percent of adult America declared itself well satisfied and well served.

"I think it is terrifying," said the late Bishop Paul Moore, a Yale aristocrat who, like most mainstream clergymen, did not support the Bush wars. "I believe it will lead us to a terrible crack in the whole culture as we have come to know it."

I believe it has, and I believe that the split between liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican is inconsequential compared to the real fracture line, between Americans who try to think clearly and those who will not or cannot. What hope, a cynical friend teased me, for a country where 70 percent believe in angels, 60 percent believe in literal, biblical, blazing Armageddon, and more than half reject Charles Darwin? He didn't need to add that creationists, science-annihilating cretins, have now recruited President Bush, who assures fundamentalists he "has doubts" about evolution.

Whether the president is that dumb or merely that dishonest is beside the point. He knows his constituency. New research published by the National Academy of Sciences asserts that human beings and chimpanzees share 99.4 percent of their DNA. Would the polls (or the elections) change if subjects had to submit to DNA tests to prove they possess the qualifying .6 percent? American readers have purchased 50 million copies of Tim LaHaye's gonzo Apocalypse novels, still more evidence that what awaits the United States of America is not a physical but an intellectual Armageddon.

Was it dry, desert sand or quicksand that the despairing Flaubert imagined? When we look down, can we still see our knees? Novelist Michael Malone, a notorious optimist, offered a faint ray of hope when he urged me to ignore all the polls -- if the government has intimidated most of the media, he argued, what makes you think the polls are credible?

When the sand begins to grip us and no lifeline appears, we clutch at straws. Yet there's anecdotal evidence that the polls *could* be wrong. Brownshirts targeted the Dixie Chicks, and they survived handsomely. At the Merle Watson bluegrass festival in rural Wilkes County, singer Laura Love ridiculed President Bush from the main stage and harvested thousands of cheers to perhaps a hundred catcalls. At a crowded bookstore in Charlottesville last month, I tossed aside the book I hoped to sell and read a white-knuckled antiwar essay I wrote in 1991. One woman walked out, but everyone else applauded and grinned at me. Come to think of it, nearly everyone I know hates these wars and these lies as much as I do.

Are we so few, or are the numbers we see part of the Bush-Fox disinformation campaign -- like Saddam's missing uranium and his 25,000 liters of anthrax? This faint last hope will be tested in the presidential election of 2004. If the polls are right and Malone is wrong, as I fear, it's going to be a long, sandy century for the United States of America, for our children and grandchildren and all those sweet singing children yet unborn.

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