

## **MOUNTAIN VIEWS: MAINSTREAM MEDIA AIDING AN AUTHORITARIAN BUSH REGIME**

By John Hanchette

**OLEAN** -- I have come to believe one reason American media ignore so many shocking federal affronts against citizen dignity and well-being is that government reporters can barely believe what they are witnessing.

I know, I know -- it's a lousy excuse because this is what they're supposed to do for a living: tell you, the American public, what's wrong in Washington. But the fact is, it's a numbing and depressing experience to observe daily a slide toward authoritarianism -- all in the name of national security or political righteousness. Let's look at that word, "authoritarianism." Webster's has it defined as "characterized by unquestioning obedience to authority ... rather than individual freedom of judgment and action."

Nationally recognized political journalists are starting to write books about it. I have on order a new book titled "It Can Happen Here: Authoritarian Peril in the Age of Bush," by Joe Conason -- a volume described as showing "how and why America has been wrenched from its founding principles and is being dragged toward an authoritarian, theocratic state." It may be bushwa. It may be enlightening. I shall review it for you once it arrives.

And be apprised this column is not about our presence in Iraq, or President George W. Bush's insistence on staying the course in seeing through an ill-conceived invasion -- although that war is a massive distraction from what I'm talking about here. (Many Americans could care less about the well-being of Iraqis or our military methods, as long as another 9/11 doesn't happen again in the United States.)

I'm referring to the rapid deterioration of the environment, our economy, our schools, our health care, civil liberties, any privacy we might have had, our immediate future in almost all domestic respects -- under a patronizing and condescending administration that deliberately ignores obvious problems and tells us only it knows what's right for us.

"Shut up and eat your spinach" might as well be the official motto of Dubya's government.

What other president would hear his attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, his chief law-enforcement officer, blurt under oath "I do not recall" a total of 72 times in a few hours about his role in the recent firings of eight federal prosecutors under his supervision who were doing undeniably good work, only not in harassing Democrats who were about to be elected -- or else too good a job in investigating white-collar grifters wired into the current administration -- and then praise Gonzales for his candor and forthright response?

This is not a symptom of simple rockheaded, dumb behavior in the White House, or innocent misperception, as many commentators would have it.

It is a sign of planned executive stubbornness and premeditated demand for political loyalty -- a carefully drawn in-your-face message to critics that not even congressional hearings nor the justified prosecutorial actions of federal public servants at the highest levels of law enforcement will hamper the strict imposition of the Bush administration's codes of unquestioned doctrinal allegiance.

This is a symptom of authoritarianism.

Oh sure, this stuff gets covered, but nowhere near the extent to which celebrity oddities, meaningless fluff and peripheral happenings to minor entertainment figures are driven into our eardrums, optic nerves and brain pans. Nightly, young Americans are trained by subtle repetition, clever visuals and Pavlovian musical cues to think they care that Anna Nicole Smith is still dead, or that some would-be singer's weird new haircut actually makes his timid, shaky voice sound better. Talent contests are reported upon as hard news.

Reporters -- TV, print, online or radio -- are not all to blame. Another reason for the casual media shrug-off of government intrusion upon our civic well-being can be placed at the feet of editors and news directors -- the people who run things and decide what you receive in your daily ration of so-called news.

Tough investigative material -- exposure of the kind of stuff that crawls out from beneath federal rocks -- is very unpopular these days.

It is very expensive to produce.

It is time-consuming and often fruitless to probe these things.

It is dangerous to media sources, for protective anonymity will be ripped to shreds by federal officials and clever lawyers demanding you name names or get thrown in jail.

It can derail the careers of upwardly mobile editors and news directors. There is little financial profit in it for media conglomerates.

It embarrasses powerful friends.

It requires deep thinking, imagination and careful research.

It is hard to market and results in meager commercial payout.

It requires elaborate and expensive defense.

The readers and viewers and listeners basically ignore it.

The reporters, editors and publishers are automatically accused of negativism.

The targets universally have learned to issue knee-jerk denials and confusing, irrelevant smokescreens.

The production of "safer" material has to be set aside in order to support such probes.

Yet, it is crucial to the nation's welfare.

My old outfit, Gannett -- which had more than a dozen national reporters in its Washington news service bureau when I retired from it five years ago but has pared that down to one very overworked fellow -- has recently illustrated the tendency to shun such unpopular fare by announcing redirection of primary staff focus to "regional" reporting (covering the hometown congressional member) and churning out "database" reports -- stories with numbers, that is.

Well, there are lots of good stories in federal numbers, of course, but I hope they pay attention to some important numbers that will be vastly unpopular with the White House and important federal agencies stocked with GOP loyalists and political operatives. Forthwith, an example -- one that reflects typical authoritarian behavior.

Although Gannett's *USA Today* has done a good job on the subject of global warming, I haven't seen much national media coverage of the stunning political interference in federal climate science.

Whatever you think about the complicated subject of global warming -- belief, denial, skepticism, scoffing, confusion, curiosity, interest, apprehension -- it is certainly to your benefit to learn more about scientific study of the subject and advances in knowledge from either end of the spectrum. It is a given the federal government needs accurate scientific information to craft effective policies.

Now the much-respected Union of Concerned Scientists and a public advocacy group called the Government Accountability Project (with the aptly named Web site [www.whistleblower.org](http://www.whistleblower.org)) have teamed to produce an alarming report titled "Atmosphere of Pressure" -- a document in which federal climate scientists contend "their findings are being tailored to reflect political goals rather than scientific fact" and their crucial studies are "being compromised by inappropriate political interference."

These two organizations set out on independent investigations of such complaints. Yet the two probes produced similar and complementary conclusions. The Union of Concerned Scientists plumbed the experiences of more than 300 federal climate scientists in various national agencies and the globally famous and independent National Center for Atmospheric Research.

The GAP -- besides relying on inside sources -- conducted 40 open, in-depth interviews with other federal climate scientists and analyzed thousands of pages of government documents, internal communications and written policy obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

A stunning 46 percent of those interviewed by both groups "perceived or experienced pressure to eliminate the words 'climate change' or 'global warming' from a variety of communications."

A stunning 43 percent experienced edits or changes during review that "changed the meaning of scientific findings."

A stunning 37 percent witnessed statements by officials at their agencies that "misrepresented scientists' findings."

Nearly two in five documented the "disappearance or unusual delay of websites, reports, or other science-based materials relating to climate."

Nearly half the scientists interviewed experienced "new or unusual administrative requirements that impair climate-related work."

A quarter of them experienced situations in which climate scientists resigned or removed themselves from a project "because of pressure to change scientific findings."

Almost 60 percent of the scientists said they had personally experienced one or more such incidents within the last five years, and the UCS and GAP catalogued a total of at least 435 "incidents of political interference."

The two investigating outfits reported, "The more frequently a climate scientist's work touches on sensitive or controversial issues, the more interference he or she reported."

By contrast, scientists at the independent National Center for Atmospheric Research -- who are not federal employees -- reported far fewer incidents of meddling. Only 22 percent of that organization's scientists experienced incidents over the last five years.

The studies found that climate scientists with findings potentially embarrassing to the Bush administration and its head-in-the-sand stance are repeatedly barred from speaking to the media, instead subjected to effective filtering by "public affairs" officers. About 80 percent of NASA climate scientists characterized today's environment for federal climate research as "worse compared with five years ago."

The UCS and GAP rightly suggest that "pre-approval and monitoring of media interviews with federal scientists by public affairs officials" -- an established Bush administration tactic -- "should be eliminated. ... Ultimate decisions about the communication of federal scientific information should lie with scientists themselves."

All this is dangerous play by the Bushies. They seem to think ignoring or denying or trying to alter reality will not have consequences -- again, a typical authoritarian belief.

As "Atmosphere of Pressure" warns: "Every day that the government chooses to ignore climate science is a day it fails to protect future generations from the consequences of global warming."

In mid-March, the House of Representatives passed the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act, legislation that includes a passage to create specific protection for scientific freedom and makes it an abuse of authority to censor, misrepresent or obstruct the dissemination of the results of federal research.

It has yet to pass the Senate, and political analysts doubt it will in that body's current configuration. Write your senators.

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John Hanchette, a professor of journalism at St. Bonaventure University, is a former editor of the *Niagara Gazette* and a Pulitzer Prize-winning national correspondent. He was a founding editor of *USA Today* and was recently named by Gannett as one of the Top 10 reporters of the past 25 years. He can be contacted via e-mail at [Hanchette6@aol.com](mailto:Hanchette6@aol.com).

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