

Consider Goldberg's *Bias and Arrogance*

This article is from the "Among Friends" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Aug. 8-9, 2009. (Although this article was written in March 2004, Mr. Havir posts it here because he believes it remains applicable today.)

By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—Most of you are probably well aware of Bernard Goldberg's recent books evaluating the news media. But, in case you are not familiar with *Bias and Arrogance*, I will spend a little time discussing information in the two books.

In December 2001 Mr. Goldberg, a CBS news correspondent for 28 years and winner of seven Emmy awards, wrote an insider's view of the "liberal bias" in major media markets. The book *Bias* became No. 1 on *The New York Times'* best-seller list.

If you consider that *The New York Times* is widely considered as a bastion of liberal views, you might find it ironic that this book exposing liberal bias in the media made it to No. 1 on the paper's best-seller list.

Last year Mr. Goldberg released a follow-up book, *Arrogance*. The cover flap of this book says: "He not only takes on Big Journalism, but offers a twelve-step program to help the media elites overcome their addiction to bias."

Twofold purpose

Someone might ask: Why are you writing about these two books?

I have two reasons.

- First, I want to help you have a clearer view of the overall approach of big journalism as you seek to keep up with world news.
- Second, I want to help you contemplate how the overall approach of big journalism is also found in the world of religious systems. Such contemplation might help you more than you can imagine.

Now I will discuss the first book. (References to *Bias* are from the Perennial paperback edition. References to *Arrogance* are from the Warner Books hard-back edition. All italics in the quotations are Mr. Goldberg's.)

He is a liberal

What makes Mr. Goldberg's exposé intriguing is that he is both an insider and a self-proclaimed liberal. On pages 55-56 he writes:

"At Rutgers, like most of us on campus in the 1960s, I was liberal on all the big issues. I was an especially big fan of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

"I thought then, and still do today, that Martin Luther King is one of the two or three greatest and most courageous Americans of the twentieth century.

"I didn't vote for Reagan either time. But I did vote for McGovern—twice. Once in the Florida primary and again in the 1972 general election.

"I'm pro-choice, with reservations, especially when it comes to minors. And I'm for gay rights, too.

"Not exactly the credentials of some raging right-winger or even some country-club Republican."

On page 57 he writes: "I see myself as an old-fashioned liberal. I'm a liberal the way liberals *used to be*. My views these days are fairly mainstream in our country. But not in America's newsrooms."

Cultural issues

Mr. Goldberg makes the point that the liberal bias should be viewed on a larger scale than political parties. On page 28: "The bias I'm talking about, by the way, isn't so much political bias of the Democratic-versus-Republican sort . . . The problem comes in the big social and cultural issues, where we often sound more like flacks for liberal causes than objective journalists."

Cuts both ways

Mr. Goldberg makes it clear that conservatives are generally just as biased as liberals. On page 126:

"Does anyone think a 'diverse' group of conservative journalists would give us the news straight? I sure as hell don't. They'd be just like the Left. Except, they'd let their *conservative* biases slip into the news, and they'd swear on a stack of Bibles that they were mainstream . . . just as liberals do now. It's the human condition . . ."

Fairness and balance

Mr. Goldberg states that he is not endorsing conservative values. He writes on page 128:

"Some right-wing ideologues do blame 'the liberal news media' for everything from crime to cancer. But that doesn't detract from another truth: that, by and large, the media elites really are liberal . . . None of this should be seen as an argument against liberal values, or as an endorsement of conservative values . . . This is nothing more than an argument for fairness and balance, something liberals ought to care about as much as conservatives . . ."

Identity politics

Mr. Goldberg explains how he began to see what he describes as "identity politics" after he moved to CBS News headquarters in New York.

From pages 62-63: "It was in New York that for the first time I started noticing things that made me feel uneasy.

"I noticed that we pointedly identified conservatives as conservatives, for example, but for some crazy reason didn't bother to identify liberals as liberals . . .

"This blindness, this failure to see liberals as anything but middle-of-the road moderates, happens all the time on network television. The Christian Coalition is identified as a conservative organization—so far, so good—but we don't identify the National Organization for Women (NOW) as a liberal organization, which it surely is.

"Robert Bork is the 'conservative' judge. But Laurence Tribe, who must have been on the *CBS Evening News* ten million times in the 1980s (and who during the contested presidential election in 2000 was a leading member of Team Gore, arguing the vice president's case before the U.S. Supreme Court), is identified simply as a 'Harvard law professor.' But Tribe is not *simply* a Harvard law professor. He's easily as liberal as Bork is conservative."

On page 65: "In the world of [Peter] Jenningses and [Tom] Brokaws and [Dan] Rathers, conservatives are not of the mainstream and need to be identified. Liberals, on the other hand, *are* the mainstream and don't need to be identified . . .

"This is the essence of the problem. To Dan Rather and to a lot of other powerful members of the chattering class, that which is right of center is conservative. That which is left of center is middle of the road. No wonder they can't recognize their own bias."

No conspiracy

Mr. Goldberg claims that the practice of identity politics is not proof that there is some liberal conspiracy as many would want to conclude.

On page 66 he writes:

"Conservatives think this is proof that there's a dark conspiracy among the liberal media elites. They're wrong. I have never heard a single reporter or producer or anchor or executive say anything like: *Let's leave off the liberal label so we can make so-and-so appear high-minded and objective. And while we're at it, let's make sure we identify the other side as conservative so our viewers will know he or she is a partisan with a right-wing ideological ax to grind.*

"It never happens that way. Never. Not even with a wink and a nod. If it did, we'd be a lot better off. Because *that* is fixable. *That* is blatant bias that cannot and would not be tolerated. What happens in reality is far worse.

"The reason we don't identify NOW as a liberal group or Laurence Tribe as a liberal professor or Tom Daschle as a liberal Democrat is that, by and large, the media elites don't see them that way. It may be hard to believe, but liberals in the newsroom, pretty much, see NOW and Tribe and even left-wing

Democrats as middle of the road. Not coincidentally, just as they see themselves. When you get right down to it, liberals in the newsroom see liberal views as just plain . . . *reasonable*."

Myopic world

Earlier in the book Mr. Goldberg shows how myopic the world of the media elite is.

On pages 30-31 he writes:

"Too many news people, especially the ones at worldwide headquarters in New York, where all the big decisions are made, basically talk to other people just like themselves. What the journalist John Podhoretz said about New Yorkers in general is especially true of the New York media elite in particular: they 'can easily go through life never meeting anybody who has a thought different from their own.'

"Far-fetched? Just think back to that famous observation by the *New Yorker's* otherwise brilliant film critic Pauline Kael, who in 1972 couldn't figure out how Richard Nixon had won the presidency.

"'I can't believe it!' she said. 'I don't know a single person who voted for him!' *Nixon carried forty-nine states to McGovern's one, for [Pete's] sake—and she wasn't kidding!*

"That's one of the biggest problems in big-time journalism: its elites are hopelessly out of touch with everyday Americans. Their friends are liberals, just as they are. They share the same values. Almost all of them think the same way on the big social issues of our time: abortion, gun control, feminism, gay rights, the environment, school prayer. After a while they start to believe that all civilized people think the same way they and their friends do. That's why they don't simply disagree with conservatives. They see them as morally deficient . . .

"The sophisticated media elites don't categorize their beliefs as liberal but as simply *the correct way to look at things*."

Whistle a happy tune

Mr. Goldberg explains how his colleagues at CBS did not appreciate his criticism of their profession. On page 117:

"If I had worked at Firestone and blown the whistle on defective tires, *60 Minutes* would have immortalized me. Lesley Stahl would have portrayed me as the courageous David going up against the corporate Goliath and would have lobbied Congress to make my birthday a national holiday. Unfortunately, the defective product I was making noise about wasn't tires; it was network news."

A few good issues

Mr. Goldberg shows examples of various liberal interest groups affecting the manner in which some major stories are told.

Let me list a few of the chapter heads to pique your interest.

- Chapter 5: "How Bill Clinton Cured Homelessness."
- Chapter 6: "Epidemic of Fear."
- Chapter 7: "'I Thought Our Job Was to Tell the Truth.'"
- Chapter 9: "Targeting Men."
- Chapter 10: "Where Thieves and Pimps Run Free."
- Chapter 11: "'The Most Important Story You Never Saw on TV.'"

Now let's look at Bernard Goldberg's second book.

Kings and queens of denial

Mr. Goldberg begins his second book by showing that many of the elite are still in denial about a problem that is so obvious to many. He likens the situation to an old movie. From page 2:

"It reminds me of a movie I saw way back in the sixties called *A Guide for the Married Man*. In one scene, Joey Bishop plays a guy caught by his wife red-handed in bed with a beautiful woman. As the wife goes nuts, demanding to know what the hell is going on, Joey and the woman get out of bed and calmly put on their clothes. He then casually straightens up the bed and quietly responds to his wife, who by now has smoke coming out of her ears, 'What bed? What girl?' After the woman leaves, Joey settles in his lounge chair and reads the paper, pausing long enough to ask his wife if she shouldn't be in the kitchen preparing dinner!

"Joey's mantra in such situations is simple: Deny! Deny! Deny! And in this scene his denials are so matter-of-fact and so nonchalant that by the time the other woman leaves the bedroom, leaving just Joey and his wife, her head is spinning and she's so bamboozled that she's seriously beginning to doubt what she just saw with her own two eyes. She's actually beginning to believe him when he says there was no other woman in the room!

"Just think of Joey Bishop as the media elite and think of his wife as *you*—the American news-consuming public."

More than bias

Mr. Goldberg spends more time in this book showing that the problem is larger than bias. He claims that arrogance is the bigger problem. On page 37 he writes:

"So, for me anyway, it's not just the bias itself but also the illiberal arrogance and the elitism and the contempt too many big journalists have for ordinary Americans. A top producer at *48 Hours*, for instance, used to call the show's audience 'white trash in a double-wide making \$15,000 a year.' This particular producer lives in a well-to-do liberal suburb of New York City, where such an observation, if it were made about any group other than 'white trash,' would be considered hate speech, punishable by life without the possibility of ever having drinks at Phil Donahue's place."

Ignore, label and attack

Mr. Goldberg describes typical reactions of big journalism toward criticism. He explains that the media elite will generally seek to ignore information that does not support their view.

On page 39 he writes of his personal experience:

"While the networks were ignoring me, something happened that the media elites didn't expect. The book [*Bias*] took off."

Before the publication of *Bias*, Mr. Goldberg knew two things for sure: "that regular Americans cared very much about the subject and that the wizards I used to work for at CBS News and their courageous counterparts at the other networks thought the only people who cared about bias in the media were right-wing dummies who had no teeth and were dating their first cousins."

But even Mr. Goldberg was surprised by "just how much passion a book about bias in the media actually generated."

"Within a couple of weeks," he writes, "*Bias* hit that sacred barometer of liberal respectability—the *New York Times* best-seller list. And it kept on rising until it hit number one, where it stayed for much of the winter and into the spring."

Mr. Goldberg goes on to explain that, if the information breaks into a wider audience, the media elite will quickly dismiss such charges as uninformed or unbalanced. If such damage control does not work, the author is subjected to "personal abuse." From page 42:

"Every day there was another shot, but I was rolling with the punches, actually enjoying the fact that my book had not only forced some of these people to acknowledge the issue of liberal bias but had caused them so much consternation."

Good old boys' club

Mr. Goldberg describes the loyalty that members of the media elite have for each other. From page 45:

"This last point is a very important one, because understanding such friendships in the world of Big Journalism is crucial to understanding how the media elite operates. It's a kind of club, mostly a men's club, where club rules mandate that members behave in a gentlemanly fashion, that they never criticize one another, and that they stick together when challenged. When one is attacked, the others are expected to circle the wagons and counterattack."

Root cause

When he addresses the root cause of bias, Mr. Goldberg mentions the role of *The New York Times*. On pages 58-59 he writes:

"So let's get to the root cause of liberal media bias in America.

"You guessed it! [It's] *The New York Times*, a paper 99.5 percent of the American people do not read, yet which is still the most influential newspaper in America because the most influential people in America do in fact read it.

"So, yes, the *New York Times* does indeed occupy a unique place in American journalism. And it's not just because its columns are syndicated to hundreds of local papers around the country. It's mostly because it sets the agenda for so many other news outlets, especially the networks where most Americans get their world and national news."

The fact is, continues Mr. Goldberg, "the Big Three news networks wouldn't know what to put on the air without it. As I've said in the past, if the *New York Times* went on strike tomorrow morning, they'd have to cancel the CBS, NBC, and ABC evening newscasts tomorrow night."

From page 61: "If the *Times* decrees a story important, by definition it *is* important. And when the *Times* ignores a story—or a book or a social trend or an idea—then it is invisible."

Bad timing

One of the examples Mr. Goldberg uses to show the liberal view of *The New York Times* is the time the newspaper printed a story about Bill Ayers, a fugitive in the Weather Underground during the 1970s. The reporter portrayed him as "a charismatic figure" with an "ebullient, ingratiating manner." On pages 56-57 Mr. Goldberg writes:

"The story ran 956 words—956 words of gushing, adolescent pap about the sixties radical who admits to participating in, among other acts of terrorism, the bombings of New York City Police Headquarters in 1970, the Capitol building in 1971, and the Pentagon in 1972."

Mr. Goldberg opines that this article may not have come under criticism because of its content if it had not been for the timing of its publication.

"But here's the real bulletin: the *New York Times* might have actually gotten away with this adoring drivel were it not for one little inconvenient fact. *The story came out on September 11, 2001.*

"You know what they say: Timing is everything. I mean, how unlucky can the Old Gray Lady [a nickname for the *Times*] get? The *New York Times* picks the very day of the worst terrorist atrocity in American history to run an admiring puff piece about . . . *a former terrorist who pines for the good old days.*"

12-step program

Toward the end of the book Mr. Goldberg shares his optimism and offers a solution. From page 237:

"I'm an optimist. I believe people can change for the better. In fact, I'm so optimistic that I believe even the most arrogant, thin-skinned, and close-minded journalists can change for the better."

On pages 238-295 Mr. Goldberg offers a 12-step program for journalists.

Standing up

Mr. Goldberg concludes his book under a section called "A Final Word." From page 296:

"Remember the movie *High Noon*? The bad guys were coming to town, and no one but Gary Cooper, playing the sheriff, would stand up to them. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get the good people of the town to do the right thing. They had too much to lose, they figured."

From pages 297-298: ". . . The fact is, there are many, many journalists more troubled by the prevailing atmosphere than they let on. Some actually differ with newsroom sentiment on the most controversial issues of the day; others just recognize the crucial importance of a lively ongoing debate. But either way, they are more silent about their feelings than they should be.

"That is the nature of peer pressure. Everyone understands that it's good for your career if you're a team player. No one wants to be seen as a troublemaker—or, worse, as a right-wing crazy.

"That has to change. Reporters need to start standing up to newspaper orthodoxies, not merely because it's right, but also because it's good policy. An ongoing civil conversation in the newsroom about contentious issues, challenging pat assumptions and unexamined beliefs, by its very nature will start to open minds. Inevitably it will make for fuller, fairer coverage of the news."

Watch out

In conclusion, let me leave you with a warning: These books may irritate you, even when you agree with his conclusions. Bernard Goldberg uses many examples to make a strong case about the realities of big journalism.

Even if you do choose not to read every word, I believe you should become familiar with these books. You will probably find doing so to be a worthwhile use of your time.