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Re-thinking Objectivity

BY BRENT CUNNINGHAM

In his March 6 press conference, in which he laid out his reasons for the coming war, President Bush mentioned al Qaeda or the attacks of September 11 fourteen times in fifty-two minutes. No one challenged him on it, despite the fact that the CIA had questioned the Iraq-al Qaeda connection, and that there has never been solid evidence marshaled to support the idea that Iraq was involved in the attacks of 9/11.

When Bush proposed his \$726 billion tax cut in January, his sales pitch on the plan's centerpiece — undoing the "double-taxation" on dividend earnings — was that "It's unfair to tax money twice." In the next two months, the tax plan was picked over in hundreds of articles and broadcasts, yet a Nexis database search turned up few news stories — notably, one by Donald Barlett and James Steele in Time on January 27, and another by Daniel Altman in the business section of The New York Times on January 21 — that explained in detail what was misleading about the president's pitch: that in fact there is plenty of income that is doubly, triply, or even quadruply taxed, and that those other taxes affect many more people than the sliver who would benefit from the dividend tax cut.

Before the fighting started in Iraq, in the dozens of articles and broadcasts that addressed the potential aftermath of a war, much was written and said about the maneuverings of the Iraqi exile community and the shape of a postwar government, about cost and duration and troop numbers. Important subjects all. But few of those stories, dating from late last summer, delved deeply into the numerous and plausible complications of the aftermath. That all changed on February 26, when President Bush spoke grandly of making Iraq a model for retooling the entire Middle East. After Bush's speech "aftermath" articles began to flow like the waters of the Tigris — including cover stories in Time and The New York Times Magazine — culminating in The Wall Street Journal's page-one story on March 17, just days before the first cruise missiles rained down on Baghdad, that revealed how the administration planned to hand the multibillion-dollar job of rebuilding Iraq to U.S. corporations. It was as if the subject of the war's aftermath was more or less off the table until the president put it there himself.

In a world of spin,
our awkward
embrace of an ideal
can make us passive
recipients of the news

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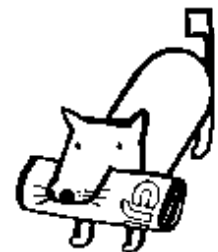
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There is no single explanation for these holes in the coverage, but I would argue that our devotion to what we call "objectivity" played a role. It's true that the Bush administration is like a clenched fist with information, one that won't hesitate to hit back when pressed. And that reporting on the possible aftermath of a war before the war occurs, in particular, was a difficult and speculative story.

Yet these three examples — which happen to involve the current White House, although every White House spins stories — provide a window into a particular failure of the press: allowing the principle of objectivity to make us passive recipients of news, rather than aggressive analyzers and explainers of it. We all learned about objectivity in school or at our first job. Along with its twin sentries "fairness" and "balance," it defined journalistic standards.

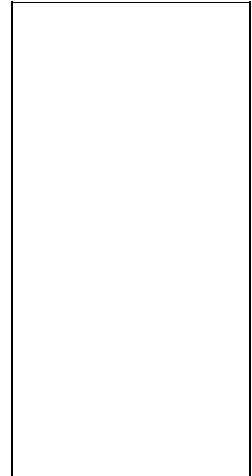
Or did it? Ask ten journalists what objectivity means and you'll get ten different answers. Some, like the Washington Post's editor, Leonard Downie, define it so strictly that they refuse to vote lest they be forced to take sides. My favorite definition was from Michael Bugeja, who teaches journalism at Iowa State: "Objectivity is seeing the world as it is, not how you wish it were." In 1996 the Society of Professional Journalists acknowledged this dilemma and dropped "objectivity" from its ethics code. It also changed "the truth" to simply "truth."

Tripping Toward the Truth

As E.J. Dionne wrote in his 1996 book, *They Only Look Dead*, the press operates under a number of conflicting diktats: be neutral yet investigative; be disengaged but have an impact; be fair-minded but have an edge. Therein lies the nut of our tortured relationship with objectivity. Few would argue that complete objectivity is possible, yet we bristle when someone suggests we aren't being objective — or fair, or balanced — as if everyone agrees on what they all mean.

Over the last dozen years a cottage industry of bias police has sprung up to exploit this fissure in the journalistic psyche, with talk radio leading the way followed by Shout TV and books like Ann Coulter's *Slander* and Bernard Goldberg's *Bias*. Now the left has begun firing back, with Eric Alterman's book *What Liberal Media?* (CJR, March/April) and a group of wealthy Democrats' plans for a liberal radio network. James Carey, a journalism scholar at Columbia, points out that we are entering a new age of partisanship. One result is a hypersensitivity among the press to charges of bias, and it shows up everywhere: In October 2001, with the war in Afghanistan under way, then CNN chairman Walter Isaacson sent a memo to his foreign correspondents telling them to "balance" reports of Afghan "casualties or hardship" with reminders to viewers that this was, after all, in response to the

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terrorist attacks of September 11. More recently, a CJR intern, calling newspaper letters-page editors to learn whether reader letters were running for or against the looming war in Iraq, was told by the letters editor at The Tennessean that letters were running 70 percent against the war, but that the editors were trying to run as many prowar letters as possible lest they be accused of bias.

Objectivity has persisted for some valid reasons, the most important being that nothing better has replaced it. And plenty of good journalists believe in it, at least as a necessary goal. Objectivity, or the pursuit of it, separates us from the unbridled partisanship found in much of the European press. It helps us make decisions quickly — we are disinterested observers after all — and it protects us from the consequences of what we write. We'd like to think it buoys our embattled credibility, though the deafening silence of many victims of Jayson Blair's fabrications would argue otherwise. And as we descend into this new age of partisanship, our readers need, more than ever, reliable reporting that tells them what is true when that is knowable, and pushes as close to truth as possible when it is not.

But our pursuit of objectivity can trip us up on the way to "truth." Objectivity excuses lazy reporting. If you're on deadline and all you have is "both sides of the story," that's often good enough. It's not that such stories laying out the parameters of a debate have no value for readers, but too often, in our obsession with, as The Washington Post's Bob Woodward puts it, "the latest," we fail to push the story, incrementally, toward a deeper understanding of what is true and what is false. Steven R. Weisman, the chief diplomatic correspondent for The New York Times and a believer in the goal of objectivity ("even though we fall short of the ideal every day"), concedes that he felt obliged to dig more when he was an editorial writer, and did not have to be objective. "If you have to decide who is right, then you must do more reporting," he says. "I pressed the reporting further because I didn't have the luxury of saying X says this and Y says this and you, dear reader, can decide who is right."

It exacerbates our tendency to rely on official sources, which is the easiest, quickest way to get both the "he said" and the "she said," and, thus, "balance." According to numbers from the media analyst Andrew Tyndall, of the 414 stories on Iraq broadcast on NBC, ABC, and CBS from last September to February, all but thirty-four originated at the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. So we end up with too much of the "official" truth.

More important, objectivity makes us wary of seeming to argue with the president — or the governor, or the CEO — and risk losing our access. Jonathan Weisman, an economics reporter for The Washington Post, says this about the fear of losing access: "If you are perceived as having a political bias, or a slant, you're screwed."

Finally, objectivity makes reporters hesitant to inject issues into the news that aren't already out there. "News is driven by the zeitgeist," says Jonathan Weisman, "and if an issue isn't part of the current zeitgeist then it will be a tough sell to editors." But who drives the zeitgeist, in Washington at least? The administration. In short, the press's awkward embrace of an impossible ideal limits its ability to help set the

agenda.

This is not a call to scrap objectivity, but rather a search for a better way of thinking about it, a way that is less restrictive and more grounded in reality. As Eric Black, a reporter at the Minneapolis Star Tribune, says, "We need a way to both do our job and defend it."

An Ideals' Troubled Past

American journalism's honeymoon with objectivity has been brief. The press began to embrace objectivity in the middle of the nineteenth century, as society turned away from religion and toward science and empiricism to explain the world. But in his 1998 book, *Just the Facts*, a history of the origins of objectivity in U.S. journalism, David Mindich argues that by the turn of the twentieth century, the flaws of objective journalism were beginning to show. Mindich shows how "objective" coverage of lynching in the 1890s by The New York Times and other papers created a false balance on the issue and failed "to recognize a truth, that African-Americans were being terrorized across the nation."

After World War I, the rise of public relations and the legacy of wartime propaganda — in which journalists such as Walter Lippman had played key roles — began to undermine reporters' faith in facts. The war, the Depression, and Roosevelt's New Deal raised complex issues that defied journalism's attempt to distill them into simple truths. As a result, the use of bylines increased (an early nod to the fact that news is touched by human frailty), the political columnist crawled from the primordial soup, and the idea of "interpretive reporting" emerged. Still, as Michael Schudson argued in his 1978 book *Discovering the News*, journalism clung to objectivity as the faithful cling to religion, for guidance in an uncertain world. He wrote: "From the beginning, then, criticism of the 'myth' of objectivity has accompanied its enunciation Journalists came to believe in objectivity, to the extent that they did, because they wanted to, needed to, were forced by ordinary human aspiration to seek escape from their own deep convictions of doubt and drift."

By the 1960s, objectivity was again under fire, this time to more fundamental and lasting effect. Straight, "objective" coverage of McCarthyism a decade earlier had failed the public, leading Alan Barth, an editorial writer at The Washington Post, to tell a 1952 gathering of the Association for Education in Journalism: "There can be little doubt that the way [Senator Joseph McCarthy's charges] have been reported in most papers serves Senator McCarthy's partisan political purposes much more than it serves the purposes of the press, the interest of truth." Government lies about the U2 spy flights, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Vietnam War all cast doubt on the ability of "objective" journalism to get at anything close to the truth. The New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer was in part a reaction to what many saw as the failings of mainstream reporting. In Vietnam, many of the beat reporters who arrived believing in objectivity eventually realized, if they stayed long enough, that such an approach wasn't sufficient. Says John Laurence, a former CBS News

correspondent, about his years covering Vietnam: "Because the war went on for so long and so much evidence accumulated to suggest it was a losing cause, and that in the process we were destroying the Vietnamese and ourselves, I felt I had a moral obligation to report my views as much as the facts."

As a result of all these things, American journalism changed. "Vietnam and Watergate destroyed what I think was a genuine sense that our officials knew more than we did and acted in good faith," says Anthony Lewis, the former New York Times reporter and columnist. We became more sophisticated in our understanding of the limits of objectivity. And indeed, the parameters of modern journalistic objectivity allow reporters quite a bit of leeway to analyze, explain, and put news in context, thereby helping guide readers and viewers through the flood of information.

Still, nothing replaced objectivity as journalism's dominant professional norm. Some 75 percent of journalists and news executives in a 1999 Pew Research Center survey said it was possible to obtain a true, accurate, and widely agreed-upon account of an event. More than two-thirds thought it feasible to develop "a systematic method to cover events in a disinterested and fair way." The survey also offered another glimpse of the objectivity fissure: more than two-thirds of the print press in the Pew survey also said that "providing an interpretation of the news is a core principle," while less than half of those in television news agreed with that.

The More Things Change

If objectivity's philosophical hold on journalism has eased a bit since the 1960s, a number of other developments have bound us more tightly to the objective ideal and simultaneously exacerbated its shortcomings. Not only are journalists operating under conflicting orders, as E.J. Dionne argued, but their corporate owners don't exactly trumpet the need to rankle the status quo. It is perhaps important to note that one of the original forces behind the shift to objectivity in the nineteenth century was economic. To appeal to as broad an audience as possible, first the penny press and later the new wire services gradually stripped news of "partisan" context. Today's owners have squeezed the newshole, leaving less space for context and analysis.

If space is a problem, time is an even greater one. The nonstop news cycle leaves reporters less time to dig, and encourages reliance on official sources who can provide the information quickly and succinctly. "We are slaves to the incremental daily development," says one White House correspondent, "but you are perceived as having a bias if you don't cover it." This lack of time makes a simpleminded and lazy version of objectivity all the more tempting. In *The American Prospect* of November 6, 2000, Chris Mooney wrote about how "e-spin," a relentless diet of canned attacks and counterattacks e-mailed from the Bush and Gore campaigns to reporters, was winding up, virtually unedited, in news stories. "Lazy reporters may be seduced by the ease of readily provided research," Mooney wrote. "That's not a new problem, except that the prevalence of electronic communication has made it easier to be lazy."

Meanwhile, the Internet and cable news's Shout TV, which drive the nonstop news cycle, have also elevated the appeal of "attitude" in the news, making the balanced, measured report seem anachronistic. In the January/February issue of *cjr*, young journalists asked to create their dream newspaper wanted more point-of-view writing in news columns. They got a heavy dose of it during the second gulf war, with news "anchors" like Fox's Neil Cavuto saying of those who opposed the war, "You were sickening then; you are sickening now."

Perhaps most ominous of all, public relations, whose birth early in the twentieth century rattled the world of objective journalism, has matured into a spin monster so ubiquitous that nearly every word a reporter hears from an official source has been shaped and polished to proper effect. Consider the memo from the Republican strategist Frank Luntz, as described in a March 2 New York Times story, that urged the party — and President Bush — to soften their language on the environment to appeal to suburban voters. "Climate change" instead of "global warming," "conservationist" rather than "environmentalist." To the extent that the threat of being accused of bias inhibits reporters from cutting through this kind of manipulation, challenging it, and telling readers about it, then journalism's dominant professional norm needs a new set of instructions.

Joan Didion got at this problem while taking Bob Woodward to task in a 1996 piece in *The New York Review of Books* for writing books that she argued were too credulous, that failed to counter the possibility that his sources were spinning him. She wrote:

The genuflection toward "fairness" is a familiar newsroom piety, in practice the excuse for a good deal of autopilot reporting and lazy thinking but in theory a benign ideal. In Washington, however, a community in which the management of news has become the single overriding preoccupation of the core industry, what "fairness" has often come to mean is a scrupulous passivity, an agreement to cover the story not as it is occurring but as it is presented, which is to say as it is manufactured.

Asked about such criticism, Woodward says that for his books he has the time and the space and the sources to actually uncover what really happened, not some manufactured version of it. "The best testimony to that," he says, "is that the critics never suggest how any of it is manufactured, that any of it is wrong." Then, objectivity rears its head. "What they seem to be saying," Woodward says of his critics, "is that I refuse to use the information I have to make a political argument, and they are right, I won't." Yet some of Woodward's critics do suggest how his material is manufactured. Christopher Hitchens, reviewing Woodward's latest book, *Bush at War*, in the June issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, argues that, while reporting on a significant foreign-policy debate, Woodward fully presents the point of view of his cooperative sources, but fails to report deeply on the other sides of the argument. Thus he presents an incomplete picture. "Pseudo-objectivity in the nation's capital," Hitchens writes, "is now overripe for regime change."

To Fill the Void

Jason Riley is a young reporter at the Louisville Courier-Journal. Along with a fellow reporter, R.G. Dunlop, he won a Polk award this year for a series on dysfunction in the county courts, in which hundreds of felony cases dating back to 1983 were lost and never resolved. Riley and Dunlop's series was a classic example of enterprise reporting: poking around the courthouse, Riley came across one felony case that had been open for several years. That led to more cases, then to a drawer full of open cases. No one was complaining, at least publicly, about this problem. In a first draft, Riley wrote that the system was flawed because it let cases fall off the docket and just disappear for years. "I didn't think it needed attribution because it was the conclusion I had drawn after six months of investigation," he writes in an e-mail. But his editor sent it back with a note: "Says who?"

In a follow-up profile of the county's lead prosecutor, a man Riley has covered for three years, many sources would not criticize the prosecutor on the record. He "knew what people thought of him, knew what his strengths and weaknesses were," Riley says. "Since no one was openly discussing issues surrounding him, I raised many in my profile without attribution." Again his editors hesitated. There were discussions about the need to remain objective. "Some of my conclusions and questions were left out because no one else brought them up on the record," he says.

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Riley discovered a problem on his own, reported the hell out of it, developed an understanding of the situation, and reached some conclusions based on that. No official sources were speaking out about it, so he felt obliged to fill that void. Is that bias? Good reporters do it, or attempt to do it, all the time. The strictures of objectivity can make it difficult. "I think most journalists will admit to feeding sources the information we want to hear, for quotes or attribution, just so we can make the crucial point we are not allowed to make ourselves," Riley says. "But why not? As society's watchdogs, I think we should be asking questions, we should be bringing up problems, possible solutions . . . writing what we know to be true."

Last fall, when America and the world were debating whether to go to war in Iraq, no one in the Washington establishment wanted to talk much about the aftermath of such a war. For the Bush administration, attempting to rally support for a preemptive war, messy discussions about all that could go wrong in the aftermath were unhelpful. Anything is better than Saddam, the argument went. The Democrats, already wary of being labeled unpatriotic, spoke their piece in October when they voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq, essentially putting the country on a war footing. Without the force of a "she said" on the aftermath story, it was largely driven by the administration, which is to say stories were typically framed by

what the administration said it planned to do: work with other nations to build democracy. Strike a blow to terrorists. Stay as long as we need to and not a minute longer. Pay for it all with Iraqi oil revenue. There were some notable exceptions — a piece by Anthony Shadid in the October 20 Boston Globe, for instance, and another on September 22 by James Dao in The New York Times, pushed beyond the administration's broad assumptions about what would happen when Saddam was gone — but most of the coverage included only boilerplate reminders that Iraq is a fractious country and bloody reprisals are likely, that tension between the Kurds and Turks might be a problem, and that Iran has designs on the Shiite region of southern Iraq.

David House, the reader advocate for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, wrote a piece on March 23 that got at the press's limitations in setting the agenda. "Curiously, for all the technology the news media have, for all the gifted minds that make it all work . . . it's a simple thing to stop the media cold. Say nothing, hide documents."

In November, James Fallows wrote a cover story for The Atlantic Monthly entitled "The Fifty-First State? The Inevitable Aftermath of Victory in Iraq." In it, with the help of regional experts, historians, and retired military officers, he gamed out just how difficult the aftermath could be. Among the scenarios he explored: the financial and logistical complications caused by the destruction of Baghdad's infrastructure; the possibility that Saddam Hussein would escape and join Osama bin Laden on the Most Wanted list; how the dearth of Arabic speakers in the U.S. government would hinder peacekeeping and other aftermath operations; how the need for the U.S., as the occupying power, to secure Iraq's borders would bring it face to face with Iran, another spoke in the "axis of evil"; the complications of working with the United Nations after it refused to support the war; what to do about the Iraqi debt from, among other things, UN-imposed reparations after the first gulf war, which some estimates put as high as \$400 billion.

Much of this speculation has since come to pass and is bedeviling the U.S.'s attempt to stabilize — let alone democratize — Iraq. So are some other post-war realities that were either too speculative or too hypothetical to be given much air in the prewar debate. Looting, for instance, and general lawlessness. The fruitless (thus far) search for weapons of mass destruction. The inability to quickly restore power and clean water. A decimated health-care system. The difficulty of establishing an interim Iraqi government, and the confusion over who exactly should run things in the meantime. The understandably shallow reservoir of patience among the long-suffering Iraqis. The hidden clause in Halliburton's contract to repair Iraq's oil wells that also, by the way, granted it control of production and distribution, despite the administration's assurances that the Iraqis would run their own oil industry.

In the rush to war, how many Americans even heard about some of these possibilities? Of the 574 stories about Iraq that aired on NBC, ABC, and CBS evening news broadcasts between September 12 (when Bush addressed the UN) and March 7 (a week and a half before the war began), only twelve dealt primarily with the potential aftermath, according to Andrew Tyndall's numbers.

The Republicans were saying only what was convenient, thus the "he said." The

Democratic leadership was saying little, so there was no "she said." "Journalists are never going to fill the vacuum left by a weak political opposition," says The New York Times's Steven R. Weisman. But why not? If something important is being ignored, doesn't the press have an obligation to force our elected officials to address it? We have the ability, even on considerably less important matters than war and nation-building. Think of the dozens of articles The New York Times published between July 10, 2002 and March 31 about the Augusta National Country Club's exclusion of women members, including the one from November 25 that carried the headline CBS staying silent in debate on women joining Augusta. Why couldn't there have been headlines last fall that read: BUSH STILL MUM ON AFTERMATH, or BEYOND SADDAM: WHAT COULD GO RIGHT, AND WHAT COULD GO WRONG? And while you're at it, consider the criticism the Times's mini-crusade on Augusta engendered in the media world, as though an editor's passion for an issue never drives coverage.

This is not inconsequential nitpicking. The New Yorker's editor, David Remnick, who has written in support of going to war with Iraq, wrote of the aftermath in the March 31 issue: "An American presence in Baghdad will carry with it risks and responsibilities that will shape the future of the United States in the world." The press not only could have prepared the nation and its leadership for the aftermath we are now witnessing, but should have.

The Real Bias

In the early 1990s, I was a statehouse reporter for the Charleston Daily Mail in West Virginia. Every time a bill was introduced in the House to restrict access to abortion, the speaker, who was solidly pro-choice, sent the bill to the health committee, which was chaired by a woman who was also pro-choice. Of course, the bills never emerged from that committee. I was green and, yes, pro-choice, so it took a couple of years of witnessing this before it sunk in that — as the antiabortion activists had been telling me from day one — the committee was stacked with pro-choice votes and that this was how "liberal" leadership killed the abortion bills every year while appearing to let the legislative process run its course. Once I understood, I eagerly wrote that story, not only because I knew it would get me on page one, but also because such political maneuverings offended my reporter's sense of fairness. The bias, ultimately, was toward the story.

Reporters are biased, but not in the oversimplified, left-right way that Ann Coulter and the rest of the bias cops would have everyone believe. As Nicholas Confessore argued in *The American Prospect*, most of the loudest bias-spotters were not reared in a newsroom. They come from politics, where everything is driven by ideology. Voting Democratic and not going to church — two bits of demography often trotted out to show how liberal the press is — certainly have some bearing on one's interpretation of events. But to leap to the conclusion that reporters use their precious column inches to push a left-wing agenda is specious reasoning at its worst. We all have our biases, and they can be particularly pernicious when they are unconscious. Arguably the most damaging bias is rarely discussed — the bias born

of class. A number of people interviewed for this story said that the lack of socioeconomic diversity in the newsroom is one of American journalism's biggest blind spots. Most newsroom diversity efforts, though, focus on ethnic, racial, and gender minorities, which can often mean people with different skin color but largely the same middle-class background and aspirations. At a March 13 panel on media bias at Columbia's journalism school, John Leo, a columnist for U.S. News & World Report, said, "It used to be that anybody could be a reporter by walking in the door. It's a little harder to do that now, and you don't get the working-class Irish poor like Hamill or Breslin or me. What you get is people from Ivy League colleges with upper-class credentials, what you get is people who more and more tend to be and act alike." That, he says, makes it hard for a newsroom to spot its own biases.

Still, most reporters' real biases are not what political ideologues tend to think. "Politically I'm a reporter," says Eric Nalder, an investigative reporter at the San Jose Mercury News. Reporters are biased toward conflict because it is more interesting than stories without conflict; we are biased toward sticking with the pack because it is safe; we are biased toward event-driven coverage because it is easier; we are biased toward existing narratives because they are safe and easy. Consider the story — written by reporters around the country — of how Kenneth L. Lay, the former CEO of Enron, encouraged employees to buy company stock as he was secretly dumping his. It was a conveniently damning narrative, and easy to believe. Only it turned out, some two years later, to be untrue, leading The New York Times's Kurt Eichenwald to write a story correcting the record on February 9.

Mostly, though, we are biased in favor of getting the story, regardless of whose ox is being gored. Listen to Daniel Bice, an investigative columnist at the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, summarize his reporting philosophy: "Try not to be boring, be a reliable source of information, cut through the political, corporate, and bureaucratic bullshit, avoid partisanship, and hold politicians' feet to the fire." It would be tough to find a reporter who disagrees with any of that.

In his 1979 book *Deciding What's News*, the Columbia sociologist Herbert Gans defined what he called the journalist's "paraideology," which, he says, unconsciously forms and strengthens much of what we think of as news judgment. This consists largely of a number of "enduring values" — such as "altruistic democracy" and "responsible capitalism" — that are reformist, not partisan. "In reality," Gans writes, "the news is not so much conservative or liberal as it is reformist; indeed, the enduring values are very much like the values of the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century." My abortion story, then, came from my sense that what was happening violated my understanding of "altruistic democracy." John Laurence distills Gans's paraideology into simpler terms: "We are for honesty, fairness, courage, humility. We are against corruption, exploitation, cruelty, criminal behavior, violence, discrimination, torture, abuse of power, and many other things." Clifford Levy, a reporter for The New York Times whose series on abuse in New York's homes for the mentally ill won a Pulitzer this year, says, "Of all the praise I got for the series, the most meaningful was from other reporters at the paper who said it made them proud to work there because it was a classic case of looking out

for those who can't look out for themselves."

This "paraideology," James Carey explains, can lead to charges of liberal bias. "There is a bit of the reformer in anyone who enters journalism," he says. "And reformers are always going to make conservatives uncomfortable to an extent because conservatives, by and large, want to preserve the status quo."

Gans, though, notes a key flaw in the journalist's paraideology. "Journalists cannot exercise news judgment," he writes, "without a composite of nation, society, and national and social institutions in their collective heads, and this picture is an aggregate of reality judgments . . . In doing so, they cannot leave room for the reality judgments that, for example, poor people have about America; nor do they ask, or even think of asking, the kinds of questions about the country that radicals, ultraconservatives, the religiously orthodox, or social scientists ask as a result of their reality judgments."

This understanding of "the other" has always been — and will always be — a central challenge of journalism. No individual embodies all the perspectives of a society. But we are not served in this effort by a paralyzing fear of being accused of bias. In their recent book *The Press Effect*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman make a strong case that this fear was a major factor in the coverage of the Florida recount of the 2000 presidential election, and its influence on journalists was borne out in my reporting for this piece. "Our paper is under constant criticism by people alleging various forms of bias," says the *Star-Tribune's* Eric Black. "And there is a daily effort to perform in ways that will make it harder to criticize. Some are reasonable, but there is a line you can cross after which you are avoiding your duties to truth-telling." In a March 10 piece critical of the press's performance at Bush's prewar press conference, *USA Today's* Peter Johnson quoted Sam Donaldson as saying that it is difficult for the media — especially during war — "to press very hard when they know that a large segment of the population doesn't want to see a president whom they have anointed having to squirm." If we're about to go to war — especially one that is controversial — shouldn't the president squirm?

It is important, always, for reporters to understand their biases, to understand what the accepted narratives are, and to work against them as much as possible. This might be less of a problem if our newsrooms were more diverse — intellectually and socioeconomically as well as in gender, race, and ethnicity — but it would still be a struggle. There is too much easy opinion passing for journalism these days, and this is in no way an attempt to justify that. Quite the opposite. We need deep reporting and real understanding, but we also need reporters to acknowledge all that they don't know, and not try to mask that shortcoming behind a gloss of attitude, or drown it in a roar of oversimplified assertions.

Toward a Better Definition of Objectivity

In the last two years, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been mentioned in more than 3,000 articles on the Nexis database, and at least 388 (11 percent) included in the same breath the fact that he was a Nobel Peace Prize winner. The same search criteria found that Yasser Arafat turned up in almost 96,000 articles, but only 177 (less than .2 percent) mentioned that he won the Nobel prize. When we move beyond stenography, reporters make a million choices, each one subjective. When, for example, is it relevant to point out, in a story about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, that the U.S. may have helped Saddam Hussein build those weapons in the 1980s? Every time? Never?

The rules of objectivity don't help us answer such questions. But there are some steps we can take to clarify what we do and help us move forward with confidence. A couple of modest proposals:

Journalists (and journalism) must acknowledge, humbly and publicly, that what we do is far more subjective and far less detached than the aura of objectivity implies — and the public wants to believe. If we stop claiming to be mere objective observers, it will not end the charges of bias but will allow us to defend what we do from a more realistic, less hypocritical position.

Secondly, we need to free (and encourage) reporters to develop expertise and to use it to sort through competing claims, identify and explain the underlying assumptions of those claims, and make judgments about what readers and viewers need to know to understand what is happening. In short, we need them to be more willing to "adjudicate factual disputes," as Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman argue in *The Press Effect*. Bill Marimow, the editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, talks of reporters "mastering" their beats. "We want our reporters to be analysts," he told a class at Columbia in March. "Becoming an expert, and mastering the whole range of truth about issues will give you the ability to make independent judgments."

Timothy Noah, writing in *The Washington Monthly* for a 1999 symposium on objectivity, put it this way: "A good reporter who is well-steeped in his subject matter and who isn't out to prove his cleverness, but rather is sweating out a detailed understanding of a topic worth exploring, will probably develop intelligent opinions that will inform and perhaps be expressed in his journalism." This happens every day in ways large and small, but it still happens too rarely. In a March 18 piece headlined *BUSH CLINGS TO DUBIOUS ALLEGATIONS ABOUT IRAQ*, *The Washington Post's* Walter Pincus and Dana Milbank laid out all of Bush's "allegations" about Saddam Hussein "that have been challenged — and in some cases disproved — by the United Nations, European governments, and even U.S. intelligence." It was noteworthy for its bluntness, and for its lack of an "analysis" tag. In commenting on that story, Steven Weisman of *The New York Times* illustrates how conflicted journalism is over whether such a piece belongs in the news columns: "It's a very good piece, but it is very tendentious," he says. "It's interesting that the editors didn't put it on page one, because it would look like they are calling Bush a liar. Maybe we should do more pieces like it, but you must be

careful not to be argumentative."

Some reporters work hard to get these same "argumentative" ideas into their stories in more subtle ways. Think of Jason Riley's comment about "feeding information" to sources. Steven Weisman calls it making it part of the "tissue" of the story. For example, in a March 17 report on the diplomatic failures of the Bush administration, Weisman worked in the idea that the CIA was questioning the Iraq-al Qaeda connection by attributing it to European officials as one explanation for why the U.S. casus belli never took hold in the UN.

The test, though, should not be whether it is tendentious, but whether it is true.

There are those who will argue that if you start fooling around with the standard of objectivity you open the door to partisanship. But mainstream reporters by and large are not ideological warriors. They are imperfect people performing a difficult job that is crucial to society. Letting them write what they know and encouraging them to dig toward some deeper understanding of things is not biased, it is essential. Reporters should feel free, as Daniel Bice says, to "call it as we see it, but not be committed to one side or the other." Their professional values make them, Herbert Gans argues, akin to reformers, and they should embrace that aspect of what they do, not hide it for fear of being slapped with a bias charge. And when actual bias seeps in — as it surely will — the self-policing in the newsroom must be vigorous. Witness the memo John Carroll, editor of the Los Angeles Times, wrote last month to his staff after a front-page piece on a new Texas abortion law veered left of center: "I want everyone to understand how serious I am about purging all political bias from our coverage."

Journalists have more tools today than ever to help them "adjudicate factual disputes." In 1993, before the computer-age version of "precision journalism" had taken root in the newsroom, Steve Doig helped The Miami Herald win a Pulitzer with his computer-assisted stories that traced damage done by Hurricane Andrew to shoddy home construction and failed governmental oversight of builders. "Precision journalism is arguably activist, but it helps us approach the unobtainable goal of objectivity more than traditional reporting strategies," says Doig, who now teaches computer-assisted reporting at Arizona State University. "It allows you to measure a problem, gives you facts that are less controvertible. Without the computer power, our Hurricane Andrew stories would have essentially been finger-pointing stories, balanced with builders saying there is no way any structure could have withstood such winds."

On April 1, Ron Martz, a reporter from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution embedded with the Army in Iraq, delivered a "war diary" entry on National Public Radio in which he defended his battlefield decision to drop his reporter's detachment and take a soldier's place holding an intravenous drip bag and comforting a wounded Iraqi civilian. The "ethicists," Martz said on NPR, tell us this is murky territory. That Martz, an accomplished reporter, should worry at all that his reputation could suffer from something like this says much about journalism's relationship with objectivity. Martz concluded that he is a human being first and a reporter second,

and was comfortable with that. Despite all our important and necessary attempts to minimize our humanity, it can't be any other way.

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