

Lessons from 1964



Eric Alterman

*B*uilding on my book *What Liberal Media?* this chapter focuses on the rise of conservative media over the last forty years. It concludes with lessons for advocacy and media in support of the foreign, economic, and domestic policy alternatives set forth in this book. Primarily, I want to consider the “elite” media, located largely in New York and Washington. The elite media are composed mostly of the top political reporters for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the top networks, the top opinion magazines, and the cable news shows.

When we discuss the media today, there are many issues on the table. They include the phony charge of “liberal bias,” the terrible problem of media ownership concentration, the focus on profits that is killing so many media companies, and the collapse of journalistic standards. But even if these issues didn’t exist, and even if there were a perfect candidate who ran on the kinds of positions staked out in this book, that candidate still would have difficulty communicating the value of those positions to the American public.

Why? To answer that question, it is necessary to go back to the 1964 election. That election was key to how the media have changed in our lifetimes. In 1964, the media were conservative in many ways. But the elite media were more liberal than the rest of the nation on most issues. They were certainly more liberal on civil rights. They were more liberal on economic policy. They were committed Keynesians. They didn’t have any use for Milton Friedman or monetarism. While they were “cold warriors,” the elite media didn’t support a unilateral showdown with the Soviet Union, as did much of the conservative right.

The Republican candidate in 1964, Barry Goldwater, ran an honest campaign, and he had lots of movement conservatives behind him. Those movement conservatives were rather unsophisticated about national politics. The most prominent and important movement conservative in terms of the media was the

billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife. Because Goldwater was speaking the honest truth to the American people, as he understood it, the movement conservatives expected that the country would respond, that Goldwater would be elected president, and that everything would be transformed, as Goldwater promised.

Instead, not only was Goldwater beaten in a landslide, he had become the national laughing stock. All the influential pundits—like Walter Lippmann, James Reston, Joseph Alsop, and Joseph Kraft—were writing columns after election day suggesting that the Republican Party was headed for oblivion, that it was going to disappear unless it amputated its conservative wing and moved to the left of the Democrats on some of these issues, particularly civil rights.

Richard Mellon Scaife realized that the values he and his friends believed in would never amount to much if the candidates who espoused them could not get their message through this liberal-elite media prism, which was twisting them and distorting them so that they sounded ridiculous by the time they reached the American people. He was right, basically. So Scaife decided to build himself a better media, so that he could have voices heard without what he understood to be distortion and perversion of the message. He and other wealthy conservatives invested heavily in new institutions that could frame the conservative message. Corporations joined in, through the influence of people like Robert Bartley, Irving Kristol, and William Simon.

Hundreds of billions of dollars have been invested in these new institutions since 1964. As a result, while there were only a few conservative nonprofit and other organizations in Washington in 1964, today there are more than 300. Some are small. Others are large, like the Heritage Foundation, with an annual budget of more than \$30 million.

THE IDEOLOGICAL MACHINE OF THE FAR RIGHT

Scaife and his colleagues created a parallel media world, an entire world view, a kind of cocoon in which hundreds of thousands or perhaps even millions of people could live comfortably. I was graduated from college in 1982. I was a columnist for my college newspaper and then went to Washington to make my fortune for two years before returning to graduate school. During those two years writing for the *Nation* and other small liberal publications, I think I made a grand total of \$500.

By comparison, David Brock was graduated from college the same year. He was a columnist for his college newspaper, the *Daily Californian*. He went to Washington at the same time I did. He ended up with a million-dollar advance from the Free Press for a book on Hillary Clinton without even a book proposal. The only question he was asked by his publishers was “Is she a lesbian?” And he had the good sense

not to answer, because if he had given the correct answer and said no, then he probably only would have gotten half a million dollars.

There are thousands of young conservatives who have gone to Washington in recent decades and been placed in jobs in conservative think tanks, the *Washington Times*, *Inside* magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many other conservative institutions. They have made entire, incredibly well-funded careers in this world, and now they can work for Fox News or on talk radio. Some can speak to millions of people who hear nothing but the conservative message. So a kind of ever-replenishing, perpetual-motion machine has been created for conservative ideology. The machine is enormously useful, because it provides conservative activists with a kind of tribal drum to constantly make their voices heard in American politics.

In its most pristine form, the impact of this ideological machine was felt in places like Florida in 2000. Through encouragement by Rush Limbaugh, FreeRepublic.com, and Fox News, thousands of conservatives hopped on planes, flew to Florida, and helped to shut down the vote count in Miami-Dade. Those votes were the votes that would have made the difference, and they were disallowed because the counties did not make the deadline because the vote was shut down.

Incredibly well-disciplined, the activist machine of the Republican Party can blast e-mail and faxes in the morning and then repeat any given message all day on FreeRepublic.com, Rush Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Hannity, talk radio, cable television, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, and the *Weekly Standard*. It is a very impressive accomplishment. And because so many Americans have become alienated from politics, those who are part of the machine have political value well beyond their numbers. The political left has nothing like that.

In terms of its activist base, the left is incredibly dispirited. The difference between Ralph Nader and Ralph Reed is instructive. Ralph Reed built institutions within the Republican Party and ended up controlling many of those institutions. By comparison, Ralph Nader seems to be destroying the Democratic Party and opening up avenues for Republican takeover.

The creation of the new conservative media landscape also has redefined discourse in the mainstream media. I have given hundreds of talks on the media power of the far right, and at least half of the time someone will stand up and say, "I wish you would stop whining, Dr. Alterman, because, yeah, sure, we admit it, we have Fox News, but you've got CNN."

That is the way the world is framed by conservatives today. Their line is that there is a conservative view and a liberal view, and the liberal view is whatever is not the conservative view. So if the conservative view is defined as "the best way to get the economy going is to give billionaires a tax break and give nothing to the working people," and "the best way to maintain the peace is to invade countries preemptively and unilaterally," then what used to be the right becomes the center. What used to be the center becomes the left, and what used to be the liberal view is outside of the room

entirely, banging on the doorway, trying to be heard. This is the frame, over and over in political discourse today. Those who try to discuss liberal alternatives face an onslaught by the right and are forced to fight a rear-guard action on conservative turf. Liberalism has become so conservative these days that it's really just a definition for "not nuts."

LESSONS FOR ADVOCACY TODAY

Those who advocate many of the policies in this volume therefore are roughly where the conservatives were in 1964. But we don't have the luxury of wasting enormous amounts of money, as did the conservatives. So we need to be smart and strategic.

The encouraging thing I would say about our moment today is that people understand the extent of the problem. Although I had some problems with the leadership of the movement against the war in Iraq at some of the rallies, I was enormously excited by how quickly mainstream people got the message, came out, and protested. They wanted to be felt and heard, around the world, as a voice for a sane foreign policy. Similarly, grassroots organizing against the FCC rule changes was incredible, especially given the complexity of the issue.

A while back, I gave a talk in Brooklyn cosponsored by twenty-one separate groups. The groups illustrated how progressive advocacy and media now are being done more intelligently. People are dividing up the work that has to be done. You've got leaders talking about a progressive cable network, and a liberal talk-radio network has been established, as well as a brand-new think tank that will take on the Heritage Foundation. You've got MoveOn.org, which is a magnificently sophisticated organization harnessing the power of the Internet. And you've got new troops, motivated by the antiwar battle and the FCC battle. No one was prepared for the extremism of recent federal policy, and that extremism has helped create more organization and cooperation on alternative policy.

We have learned the price of speaking too closely to our principles at the cost of our effectiveness. I am not saying that we throw out our principles. But let's fight about it after we have won. Let's worry about what divides us once we are in power. Let's not fight about who's to blame for having lost. That can be more satisfying emotionally, but we don't have the luxury of such feelings anymore, especially when you see the cost in terms of people's lives. The stakes in foreign, economic, and domestic policy are too high.

We are at an incredibly propitious moment in American history, and there are some very encouraging signs. But we are so far behind and the landscape is so large that we have no choice but to be extremely focused and strategic. We need to make thoughtful choices before we expend our resources.

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