

Preface

Americans wander between extremes: public interest versus private prerogative; equal opportunity and justice for all versus the amassing of individual wealth and power; appeals of hope versus appeals of fear. If as a people we subscribe to the ancient Greek principle of moderation in all things, that differs from our wanderings--and recalls Act I, Scene III of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Hearing the three witches, the "weird sisters," foretell his ascent as thane and king, Macbeth uttered: "Nothing is, But what is not." Under the spell of political communication today, the words of Macbeth apply equally to Americans' politics, journalism, and reality. All three, since the 1970s, have wandered to the political Right. This book seeks to trace how and why, beginning by reviewing my experience teaching with political strategist Karl Rove.

Politics is the art of war in the United States; the news, the symbolic battlefield on which issues are fought and often quickly decided. Those facts crystallized during World War I when the U.S. government for the first time deployed political communication on a global scale in a propaganda campaign that transformed politics and news. Through that campaign, American journalism subjected itself voluntarily to government restraint, and produced its own Macbeth moment: the news, too, became not what it seemed (chapter 5). A half-century later, the political sociologist Philip Schlesinger observed: the news has become "the exercise of power over the interpretation of reality."ⁱ

In the sixties and early seventies, about the time Schlesinger wrote, the American political Right experienced its own Macbeth moment. What appeared to be the demise of Senator Barry Goldwater and the death of conservatism in the presidential election of 1964 turned out to be the instant of conservatism's rebirth. The proof came to me one summer two years later when as a high school reporter I covered a Young Republicans national convention in Omaha,

Nebraska. There, young, groomed conservatives in suits and dresses crammed the convention hall, their spirits soaring above a half-acre field of red, white, and blue flags that carpeted a path to a huge aerial banner: “Young Americans for Freedom.” YAF, the most radical of young conservatives, formed in backlash in September 1960 after the Republican National Convention, where Vice President Richard Nixon chose the moderately liberal Senator Henry Cabot Lodge as his running mate. Six years later in Omaha, Republican moderates and liberals were running for cover.ⁱⁱ The YAFers and their banner commanded the floor, almost daring others to show themselves. The four Republican friends who’d persuaded me to report the convention grew nearly rabid with thirteen hundred other delegates who jumped to their feet as keynoter Ronald Reagan claimed them in the name of individualism, free enterprise, and anticommunism. Conservatism, it seemed clear in Omaha, not only wasn’t dead; it was driving the bus two years after the conventional wisdom declared that Goldwater had run the bus into the ditch.

Heady stuff for a sixteen-year-old reporter like me! Though I considered my four friends and their Omaha colleagues a bit extreme, I nevertheless empathized with them, as I strived for objectivity in the tradition of Walter Lippmann, who inspired generations of journalists to live as detached observers. Only many years later did I recognize in that same summer my own Macbeth moment. In writing about the Young Republicans, I prided myself on my objectivity; yet within a month, and from the same typewriter at home in Sioux City, Iowa, I wrote President Lyndon Johnson about the War in Vietnam, urging him to “bomb the hell out of Red China.”

Objectivity? In urging an attack on China, my reportorial objectivity went out the window. Engulfed in the conventional wisdom of a culture as Reagan advanced it, I failed even to see a contradiction. I claimed to be an objective reporter as I wrote about the Young Republicans, but in urging Johnson to bomb, I acted on the values of my culture—Cold War

anticommunism, first among them—to urge an attack on another country, with no sense of consequences. Even in my own life, it seemed, nothing was, but what was not.

These personal contradictions resurfaced in a larger way thirty years later as I attended graduate school and taught, by happenstance, with Karl Rove. At the time, I didn't recognize that teaching with Karl would re-connect me to Omaha, let alone to the broader rise of the political Right and its impact on journalism. But it became clear to me that Karl as political operative posed a threat to Democrats comparable only to that of his friend, the late Lee Atwater. In fact, Karl's work and the broader rise of the Right have *utterly* changed the country, in my view, partly through less visible means. This book is an effort to focus them for students of politics and journalism.

The book is organized into four parts. Part one (chapters 1-4) addresses the question: how could Karl Rove be so effective? It answers by telling the story of Karl's preparations and lessons for our class, much of it in his own words, and in those of the political ad men, advance men, image shapers, and journalists who guest-lectured. (Many of them are well-known; none was as compelling as Karl.) However, Karl's success also roots deeply in the long development of propaganda. Part two, therefore, traces that development (chapter 5), situates in it the rise of the American political Right, and its impact on the news (chapter 6). Part two then situates Karl's emergence as a chief beneficiary in the rise of the Right and a chief coordinator, and illustrates part of why political communication as Karl practices it is so potent (chapter 7).

Part three details how this new force shapes our news, politics, and everyday reality (chapter 8) – and propelled the United States to war in Iraq (chapter 9). Part three then itemizes, through the voices of 32 American journalists, why mainstream journalism can't seem to shake this potent force (chapters 10-11).

Chapter 12 summarizes how Karl and the political Right have changed American politics and journalism, and itemizes why they may prevail for another generation.

Fundamentally, the book outlines how the Right, with Karl as exemplar, has refined political communication not only to win elections but to *steal reality*, to shift the United States to the political Right. By mastering political communication, Karl and the Right, like Shakespeare's witches, have conjured up not a Macbeth moment, but an entire era. They have done so partly by dispelling free political debate through new systems of propaganda. And once free debate is reduced to propaganda, the tools to advance it—public relations and message mastery, advertising, polling, marketing, branding, information technology, and even journalism itself—become instruments of political control.

By tracing these developments, I hope to account for the rise of the Right, the fracture of news, and Karl's success—and to foresee our destiny as people in the grip of this reality-stealing power. That power slowed publication of this book. ⁱⁱⁱ

For insights that made this work possible, I wish to acknowledge, first, Karl Rove, whose genius became evident in Austin during our work together, who became my friend, and for whose abilities I have the greatest respect, even as we disagree as to principles, goals, and methods.

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ⁱ Philip Schlesinger, “The Sociology of Knowledge.” Paper presented at a meeting of the British Sociological Association, March 24, 1972.

ⁱⁱ Four years later, my friend, former classmate, and political columnist David Yepsen of the *Des Moines Register*, observed: “The function of liberal Republicans is to bury their dead.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The power about which I write is measurable not only in political terms, but in law, in a way that shaped this study. Mirroring the shift to the right outlined in the book, American copyright law over the last thirty years has increasingly privileged private property over the public interest. As a result, scholars, except under the limits of the fair use doctrine, apparently may not quote e-mail, even that directly addressed to them, without the express consent of the sender.

Four years before learning this stricture, yet in the name of fairness and out of respect for our friendship (and knowing how busy he was in the Bush administration), I sought Karl’s consent by seeking to engage him in producing this book. I first wrote him about it in July 2003, then checked in with him a couple times a year, often with an update on my progress. To avoid the suggestion of unethical use of material, I delayed finishing this work until after Karl completed the fourth Bush administration election in 2006; continued exchanging notes with him; sought to see him to talk about the book; and, finally, after dropping him a note to encourage his comment, shipped him the manuscript in mid-June 2007, to seek his review. Regrettably, for the first time, Karl didn’t answer. Instead, he told a mutual friend – not that the manuscript was either inaccurate or unfair – but that his confidence had been breached.

In the absence of Karl’s direction (and as I remembered the record of Karl’s work outlined in chapter 7), I sought legal advice. While opinions varied, a majority consensus appeared to be that while I might quote Karl freely from our work together, quoting his e-mails might open legal liability. As a result, the e-mails Karl sent me are not quoted here, but revised (and are so identified in the text by single quotation marks). Unfortunately, my efforts did not satisfy my publisher of the time, Jonathan Sisk of Rowman and Littlefield. We had contracted in October 2006 to produce and publish the book; they requested, set, and advertised a January 2008 publication date. But more than a year after I submitted the manuscript, Sisk withdrew from our contract. He indicated he feared Karl might sue.

Looking back, it became apparent that the road to publishing this work itself became the play within the play. The forces I outline in *Stealing Reality* as having utterly changed American life have equally, through contemporary copyright law, prevented telling this story as completely as I’d intended, by fully quoting the e-mails Karl sent me. They also scared off not just Sisk from publishing the book; after I disclosed that experience, three more publishers dropped out.

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