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From the Selected Works of Michael I Niman Ph.D.

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Truth and Lies

Michael I Niman, Ph.D., *Buffalo State College*



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INSIDE: TRUTH AND LIES ● BAD NEWS FROM A TOP
SPY ● AND THEN THEY CAME FOR ME ● PAYDAY
PARASITES ● HOLLYWOOD'S NEW CENSORS

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Editor: Tony Sutton
(editor@coldtype.net)

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ISSUE 34 | FEBRUARY / MARCH 2009

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----------------------------------|
| 3. | TRUTH AND LIES | Michael I. Niman |
| 5. | HOLLYWOOD'S NEW CENSORS | John Pilger |
| 7. | BAD NEWS FROM AMERICA'S TOP SPY | Chris Hedges |
| 10. | INSIDE THE BIOLOGICAL WARFARE CENTRE | Sherwood Ross |
| 19. | NO VICTORS IN THE WAR ON DISSENT | William John Cox & Colleen Rowley |
| 22. | WHO IS A TERRORIST? | Mats Svennson |
| 24. | HURWITT'S EYE | Mark Hurwitt |
| 25. | AND THEN THEY CAME FOR ME | Lasantha Wickramatunga |
| 29. | PAYDAY PARASITES | Adam Turl |
| 32. | THE SICK PSYCHOLOGY OF ENTITLEMENT | John Carney |
| 34. | THE NEW SURGE OF CEO SELF-SACRIFICE | Sam Pizzigati |
| 36. | CHANGE (IN RHETORIC) WE CAN BELIEVE IN | William Blum |
| 42. | WHY WE NEVER GET THE CHANGE WE NEED | Tim Buchholz |
| 45. | FUTURE SHOCK AT ARMY SCIENCE CONFERENCE | Nick Turse |
| 51. | SHARPEVILLE 1960, GAZA 2009 | Haidar Eid |
| 54. | GEORGE MITCHELL AND THE MIDDLE EAST | Gerry Adams |
| 56. | WHY ARE WE STILL IN AFGHANISTAN? | Norman Solomon |
| 58. | LEON PANETTA MAKES NICE | Ray McGovern |
| 63. | WHO'LL BE THERE WHEN THE FLOOR DROPS OUT? | David Michael Green |
| 68. | THE PROPAGANDA OF THE VICTOR | George Monbiot |

COVER: Policeman lashes out at protesters during a demonstration against the Gaza Massacre outside the Israeli embassy in London in January. In February, press photographers protested outside London's Metropolitan Police headquarters at New Scotland Yard over fears that new anti-terror legislation would make covering demonstrations such as these almost impossible. **Photo:** Jess Hurd, ReportDigital.co.uk

Truth and lies

It's not a political ideology or position. Truth is the truth. It's honesty and accuracy, says **Michael I. Niman**

The motto at my local National Public Radio news station, is “Somewhere between the left and the right lies the truth – that’s where you’ll find us.” I’ve always been annoyed by this trite bit of self-aggrandizement. It’s not just because it’s silly. It’s because the truth is the truth. And the truth doesn’t reside between the left and the right. The truth is not a political or economic ideology or position. It’s the truth. It’s honesty and accuracy. Period.

This motto isn’t just some innocent stupidity repeated ad nauseam. It’s dangerous. It subtly sends out a loaded political attack message supporting one position, centrism, while surreptitiously dismissing other positions as lies, and their adherents as liars. The fact that this motto endlessly soldiers on over the years means it is largely unquestioned, save for the complaints of a nitpicking journalism professor. It’s accepted. People don’t think about it and they don’t question it. In his now classic book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, sociologist James Loewen examines high school American history textbooks and how they whitewash American history – for example, skipping unsavory bits like the cannibalism at Jamestown and the robbing of Indian graves at Plymouth, while rationalizing wars of expansion and sugar-coating anti-native genocide. But the worse crime the high school texts commit, according to

Loewen, is to simplify the dynamic field of history into a series of simple “facts.” There “were 10 million Native Americans at the time of the Columbian invasion” – not 100 million as many anthropologists argue, or two million as historians once claimed, but 10 million. That’s the answer: Memorize it and spit it back on the test.

Under this pedagogy, history ceases to be a discussion or an evolving set of arguments, but a set of simple facts to be memorized – a truth chosen by a textbook editor from a selection of many convincing arguments. The issue here isn’t whether there were a dozen or a billion people living in the Americas at time of conquest – that argument will continue to evolve. The issue is that students are completely unaware that there is an argument. The random truths, like the outright lies that social studies teachers wittingly and unwittingly spread, are deadly because they short circuit inquiry and critical thinking. History becomes a set of facts. The wrong answers become lies because they go against the conventional wisdom.

Let’s look back on some very recent history – the giddy hoopla leading up to the inauguration of Barack Obama. Corporate news outlets broadcast a daily countdown of George W. Bush’s last days in office. Everyone was on board. When inauguration day came, the media trained their cameras on Bush’s helicopter as it evacuated Washing-

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ONE WORD

The historic massive 1999 “Battle in Seattle” protests against corporate globalization were covered as a sporting event, devoid of any context – cops swinging clubs against the heads of union members and students who appeared in Seattle for no apparent reason other than to be savagely beaten

Dr. Michael I. Niman, a regular contributor to *ColdType*, is a professor of journalism and media studies at Buffalo State College, New York

ton to the roar of two million revelers. We all supported Barack Obama – always. We all always resisted the Bush agenda. We were all always against the Iraq War. We all knew the economy was a house of cards. We were all always concerned about global warming. We never bought into that WMD story. We never voted for Republicans who promised to make us richer. This is the truth.

This whole celebration, like our NPR station’s conception of the truth, also annoys me. That’s because if the media actually did their job and engaged in critical reporting and fact-checking, back when it actually mattered, we wouldn’t have an Iraq war. If the people who are so giddily celebrating the end of the Bush era actually resisted the Bush agenda, back when their voices were needed, there wouldn’t have been a second Bush term – or a first.

If media outlets like NPR actually made space for critical views on the economy, back when it counted, perhaps balancing their pro-investor programming with labor and sustainability oriented content, we possibly would have sobered up before our economy careened out of control into a black hole. But the corporate media didn’t allow for competing truths to collide into dynamic arguments open to both the left and the right. We just got one point of view, one argument, which ironically is the same right-wing economic policy argument the media is now deriding as flawed. The historic massive 1999 “Battle in Seattle” protests against corporate globalization were covered as a sporting event, devoid of any context – cops swinging clubs against the heads of union members and students who appeared in Seattle for no apparent reason other than to be savagely beaten.

Critical voices can only be celebrated in hindsight after being proven right; they couldn’t be allowed to enter the debate at a time when hearing them was crucial. It turns out the peaceniks were right about the war, the lefties were right about the global economy, and the tree-huggers were right about the environment. Who knew?

That’s another problem with our NPR

station’s notion that “somewhere between the left and the right lies the truth.” There is no left on the radio in our area. So what exactly are they saying? When we talk about the left side of the political spectrum, we’re talking about socialism and radical programs supporting social welfare with communist and democratic-socialist variants. When we speak of the right, we’re generally referring to unfettered capitalism with libertarian and corporate fascist variants.

Our mainstream media doesn’t support outright fascism at this junction in history (though the Hearst media chain supported Hitler in the early 1930 and the *New York Times* and the Associated Press both had a soft spot for Mussolini). Throughout my lifetime, however, it’s been a loyal cheerleader for the corporate capitalist agenda that the new conventional wisdom acknowledges has “suddenly” brought us to the brink of economic and environmental collapse. The mainstream media has made sure to marginalize as “radical” the few critical voices that hang on ghettoized in the “alternative media.” TV and radio is replete with dozens of shows like PBS’s *Nightly Business Report* – news geared toward celebrating the unfettered accumulation of wealth at almost any cost to society by a small minority of privileged investors. There is no regularly scheduled socialist counterpoint. There are no deep ecologists hosting news shows.

While we might never get to hear them, though, we get to hear about them. They’re ecologists, leftist economists, civil libertarians, feminists, humanists, and other assorted outcasts. They’re not to be taken seriously, even though history has proven them reliably prescient. The media dismisses them as radicals and wackos. They live in mysterious places, like “the left,” where the truth never goes.

So let’s get this one simple fact of physics right. Earth to NPR: Listen up! Somewhere between the left and the right lies the center. The truth is the truth. And lies are lies. And only an informed critical thinking population can sort them out.

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