

PR WATCH

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How Now, Mad Cow?

by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

Common Courage Press has just released the paperback version of our 1997 book, *Mad Cow USA*—the book that predicted the emergence of the deadly human and animal dementia disease in the United States. When *Mad Cow USA* was first published in November 1997, it bore the subtitle “Could the Nightmare Happen Here?” We used a question mark because we thought mad cow disease was possible but still preventable in the United States, if the meat industry and government regulators adopted adequate safety measures.

Our book received favorable reviews at the time from some interesting publications, such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *New Scientist*, and *Chemical & Engineering News*. Otherwise, it went largely ignored and unheralded. It sold briskly but briefly during the infamous Texas trial of Oprah Winfrey for the alleged crime of “food disparagement,” and then slid into obscurity until December 2003, when the “nightmare” in our subtitle arrived and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman announced that mad cow disease has been found in the United States.

As we've followed mad cow disease over the years, we've seen U.S. government and industry officials spin it as just an hysterical European food scare. On March 20, 1996, the British government reversed itself after ten years of denial and announced that mad cow disease—known technically as “bovine spongiform encephalopathy” or BSE—had

10 YEARS OF PR WATCH

This year, the Center for Media & Democracy celebrates ten years of exposing manipulative and deceptive corporate and government public relations. Founded as the first public interest organization to address the problem of organized propaganda campaigns and their impact on democracy (especially progressive social change), the Center has exposed flacks in this newsletter, on our website, in countless interviews and articles, and in the five books written by CMD founder John Stauber and *PR Watch* editor Sheldon Rampton.

Starting with the first issue of *PR Watch*, which profiled the secretive PR/public affairs firm Mongoven, Biscoe & Duchin in “Spy for Hire,” we've pulled the curtain back to show the behind-the-scenes work done to shape public opinion. Over the years we've tracked tobacco industry PR, cor-

porate greenwashing, and FDA spinning. Unfortunately, we've never faced a shortage of material.

Last year was our busiest year. CMD took a leading role in reporting on the Bush administration's campaign to sell the Iraq war. The culmination of this work is our book *Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*. Released in July 2003, it quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller. We also launched an exciting new project in online, open-content journalism, *Disinfopedia.org*. (See *PR Watch*, 4th Quarter 2003.) And at the end of December, a lowly cow in Washington state tested positive for mad cow disease, causing the office phone to ring off the hook and giving us the opportunity to educate the media and public about our compromised governmental agencies.

In response to U.S. government officials and the public being confronted with the threat of mad cow disease here,

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passed into humans and was the cause of a fatal dementia then called “new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease” or nvCJD. (Nowadays they don’t say “new,” and the abbreviation is just vCJD.) At the time, the U.S. media dutifully echoed reassurances from government and livestock industry officials that all necessary precautions had been taken long ago to guard against the disease.

Those who had read our book realized that U.S. assurances of safety were based on public relations and public deception, not science or adequate regulatory safeguards. We revealed that the United States Department of Agriculture knew as early as 1991 that to prevent mad cow disease in America would require a strict ban on “animal cannibalism”—the feeding of rendered slaughterhouse waste from cattle to cattle as protein and fat supplements—but refused to support the ban because it would cost the meat industry money. We exposed the dangerous inadequacies of the FDA’s 1997 regulations in the final chapter of this book when it first appeared, and many of those inadequacies remain today.

It was the livestock feed industry that led the effort in the early 1990s to lobby into law the Texas food disparagement act that was the basis for the 1996 lawsuit against Oprah Winfrey and her guest, rancher turned vegetarian activist Howard Lyman. Winfrey and Lyman eventually won the lawsuit, but it cost them years of legal battling and millions of dollars in attorney fees. In reality, the public lost, because mainstream media stopped covering the threat of mad cow disease in the United States. As one TV network producer told us at the time, his orders were to keep his network from being sued the way Oprah had been.

There have been several new developments since our book originally came out, some of which have been good news. In 1997, the discovery that mad cow disease had passed into humans was still so recent that public health experts could only guess how many cases of vCJD would eventually develop in the millions of people who had eaten contaminated British beef. At the time, the available estimates ranged from a few dozen to a few million. Since then, information has accumulated showing that neither the best-case nor the worst-case scenarios of six years ago are likely. In early 2001, leading scientists from the National Institutes of Health, the USDA and England’s National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit published an assessment in *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Much of the lingering uncertainty about the extent of the vCJD outbreak is attributable to the fact that the incubation period of vCJD is unknown,” they stated, adding: “Depending on assump-

tions about the incubation period and other variables, mathematical modeling predicts that the total extent of the outbreak could range from fewer than one hundred to hundreds of thousands of cases.” Since then, the lower end of these estimates has risen slightly, and the upper end has also dropped. As of January 2004, the total number of human cases in England stood at 143. One statistical analysis published in 2003 estimated that the number of additional future deaths from vCJD in humans in England would likely be somewhere between 10 and 2,600. Even today, however, estimates like these rely on numerous unproven assumptions and unknown factors and should be regarded as educated guesses rather than reliable prediction.

There has also been some additional bad news, which is specific and unique to the United States. When we wrote *Mad Cow USA*, we gave only one brief mention to chronic wasting disease (CWD). Like mad cow disease, CWD is a “prion disease”—a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy caused by a rogue protein. The difference is that whereas mad cow appears in cattle, CWD appears in deer and elk. It was first detected in the United States in the 1960s, and since then it has been spreading slowly through the deer and elk population. At first confined to a few western states, it has since moved into Canada and Wisconsin. Mike Miller of the Colorado Division of Wildlife has described chronic wasting disease as “an epidemic occurring in slow motion.” No one has yet come up with a plausible strategy for stopping its spread, and no one yet even knows why it seems to spread more easily in wild deer and elk than mad cow has spread in captive populations.

If mad cow disease has taught us anything, its lesson is that no one should assume anything about a disease of this type, which is unusual in nature, difficult to detect during its long invisible latent period, and therefore hard to study and still poorly understood. It is especially unwise to make assumptions about the safety of a disease which, once it occurs, is 100 percent fatal. The British made this mistake, reassuring the public that beef was safe to eat, and their people (especially British farmers) paid a heavy price. We find it disturbing, therefore, that the appearance of chronic wasting disease in Wisconsin was greeted by reassurances that hunters not only could continue to eat venison safely, they should actually hunt *more* in hopes of thinning the deer herd and slowing the spread of the disease. To encourage hunters, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources even paid for radio commercials featuring a jingle that mocked CWD as “crying and whining disease” and urged, “Bag

'em, tag 'em, drag 'em, freeze 'em, test 'em, fry 'em / I ain't afraid of no twisted little prion."

Following the publication of *Mad Cow USA*, we continued to give media interviews, spoke at conferences of U.S. families who had lost relatives to CJD, and saw our book translated and published in both South Korea and Japan. Our activism won us some interesting enemies, such as Richard Berman, a Republican lobbyist who runs an industry-funded front group that calls itself the "Center for Consumer Freedom." Berman is a darling of the tobacco, booze, biotech and food industries, and with their funding he issued an online report depicting us as the ringleaders of a dangerous conspiracy of vegetarian food terrorists out to destroy the U.S. food system. Shortly after September 11, the Center for Consumer Freedom characterized our writing and speaking as a form of "extremist violence. . . . Words deployed with the intention of causing panic are a form of violence, too. The 'mad cow' scare campaign in the United States is intended to frighten consumers to avoid the conventional meat supply and 'go organic.'"

Of course, Berman had an easier time attacking us before the emergence of mad cow disease in North America, a development that we found saddening but not surprising. When the first mad cow was found last May in Canada, we told interviewers that it was bound to show up also in the United States and Mexico. All three nations are one big free trade zone under the North America Free Trade Agreement. And all three were feeding their cattle slaughterhouse waste in the form of blood,

fat, rendered meat and bone meal—the practice which caused the disease to spread widely in England. Until February of this year, North America calves were literally weaned on milk formula containing "raw spray dried cattle blood plasma," even though scientists have known for years that blood can transmit prion diseases.

The United States has spent millions of dollars on PR convincing Americans that mad cow could never happen here, and even now the USDA is engaged in a crisis management plan that has federal and state officials, livestock industry flacks, scientists and other trusted experts assuring the public that this is no big deal. Their litany of falsehoods includes statements that a "firewall" feed ban has been in place in the United States since 1997, that muscle meat is not infective, that no slaughterhouse waste is fed to cows, that the U.S. tests adequate numbers of cattle for mad cow disease, that quarantines and meat recalls are just an added measure of safety, that the risks of this mysterious killer are miniscule, that no one in the United States has ever died of any such disease, and on and on. The USDA has also attempted to pin the U.S. mad cow crisis on Canada, claiming that it was the source of the mad cow discovered in Washington state. Blaming Canada, however, still leaves numerous questions: How many other infected cows have crossed our porous borders and been processed into human and animal food? Why are U.S. slaughterhouse regulations so lax that a visibly sick cow was sent into the human food chain weeks before tests came back with the mad cow findings? Where did the infected byproduct feed that

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this animal ate come from, and how many thousands of other animals have eaten similar feed?

Since the discovery of mad cow disease in the United States, our phones have rung off the hook with interview requests. The *New York Times* noted that "The 1997 book *Mad Cow USA*, by Sheldon Rampton and John C. Stauber, made the case that the disease could enter the United States from Europe in contaminated feed." Dr. Stanley Prusiner, who won the Nobel Prize for his research into the unique disease agent called a "prion" that causes mad cow disease, called the U.S. practice of weaning calves on cattle blood protein "a really stupid idea." All of this would be very vindicating, except for

The U.S. meat industry hopes that the millions of dollars in campaign contributions doled out over the years will continue to forestall the necessary regulations, and that soothing PR assurances will convince the consuming public that this is just some vegetarian fear-mongering conspiracy.

one problem: the millions of dollars that the government and industry are spending on PR to pull the wool over the public's eyes might just succeed in forestalling the necessary steps that now, at this late date, must still be taken to avoid a worsening crisis.

Fortunately, the steps which need to be taken are rather simple and understandable. We should ship U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman and her smartest advisors to Britain so they can study and copy the successful feed and testing regulations that have managed the mad cow problem in Europe. Veneman and her advisors should institute a complete and total ban on feeding any slaughterhouse waste to livestock. You may think this ban is already in place, because that's what industry and government said they did back in the summer of 1997. But billions of pounds of rendered fat, blood meal, meat and bone meal from pigs and poultry are rendered and fed to cattle, and cattle are rendered and fed to other food species, a perfect environment for spreading and amplifying mad cow disease and even for creating new strains of the disease.

The feed rules that the United States must adopt can be summarized this way: human beings do not have to be vegetarians, but the animals we eat must be. The United States must also institute an immediate testing

regime that will test millions of cattle, not just the 20,000 that were tested out of 35 million slaughtered in the past year in the United States. Japan now tests all cattle before consumption, and disease experts like Dr. Prusiner recommend this goal for the United States.

Unfortunately, Veneman and the Bush administration continue to drag their feet. The U.S. meat industry hopes that the millions of dollars in campaign contributions doled out over the years will continue to forestall the necessary regulations, and that soothing PR assurances will convince the consuming public that this is just some vegetarian fear-mongering conspiracy. Will the American public buy this bull? It has in the past. Much depends on journalists and what they are willing to swallow. It looks now as if papers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* are finally putting some good investigative reporting teams onto this issue, and that may undercut and expose PR ruses such as the USDA's "blame Canada campaign" or the claim that USDA's planned increase in testing is sufficient.

It is likely that most U.S. trade partners will continue their boycotts of U.S. beef, rendered byproducts, animals and animal products will continue, and this will apply a major economic hurt to meat producers big and small across the country. Will their anger turn against the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the Animal Feed Industry Association and other lobbies that have prevented the United States from doing the right thing in the past? Or will this become some sort of nationalistic food culture issue, with confused consumers and family farmers blaming everyone but the real culprits in industry and government?

The United States must be made to follow the lead of the European Union nations, ban all feeding of slaughterhouse waste to livestock, and test millions of cattle for mad cow disease. In the meantime, if you want American beef that has been grown in a safe manner, search out products that are certified organic. ■

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WHERE'S THE (BSE-FREE) BEEF?

by Diane Farsetta

International and domestic consumers want it. Meat packers want it. Producers are willing to offer it, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture says no one can get it unless and until they decide otherwise.

The controversial product? U.S. beef from 100 percent screened cattle determined to be free of mad cow disease.

In February, Creekstone Farms Premium Beef, a slaughterhouse and meatpacker in Kansas, said it was going to build its own testing laboratory for mad cow disease, or BSE (for bovine spongiform encephalopathy). Currently the only USDA-approved laboratory for BSE testing is in Ames, Iowa, although the USDA says it's adding more labs in the near future. The USDA warned Creekstone Farms that it could face criminal charges if it carried out any independent testing. And when a Missouri rancher called the Ames facility to ask whether he could pay to have his cattle screened there, he was denied in no uncertain terms.

The December 2003 discovery of a BSE positive cow in Washington state—the first such case in the United States—quite understandably has many people worried. Ingesting BSE-infected meat can lead to an always-fatal neurological wasting disease in humans called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. Following the December announcement, more than 50 countries closed their borders to U.S. beef. In one fell swoop, ten percent of the U.S. beef market—some \$3 billion in international sales annually—collapsed, cattle prices plunged, and some industry sectors have had to lay off workers.

In early March, just prior to a long-delayed meeting between George Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox, Mexico became one of only two countries to ease their ban on U.S. beef. Mexico now allows the import of boneless beef from U.S. cattle younger than 30 months. This “is a big first step” to resuming beef exports, proclaimed an elated USDA undersecretary. But Japan, formerly the number one importer of U.S. beef, insists that it will not resume imports until the U.S. beef industry follows the Japanese example of testing all cattle for BSE at slaughter.

Although the news cycle following the discovery of BSE in America was filled with reassuring stories of continued domestic beef eating, there is evidence of U.S. concern as well. *Consumers Union*, the non-profit interest group that publishes Consumer Reports, conducted a study in mid-January that found near-universal awareness of mad cow disease among those interviewed (more than 99 percent). Nearly one-third of survey participants said they are concerned or very concerned about the safety of U.S. beef, and over 70 percent said

they would pay more to ensure that cattle going into the human food supply are BSE-free.

Creekstone Farms wants to implement 100 percent testing so that it can resume sales to Japan. A recent survey of beef packers and processors found that nearly 60 percent support private testing as a way to re-open international markets. Nearly half of the meat packers surveyed said they would consider testing every animal they process, if the tests had USDA approval. The Missouri rancher mentioned above was responding to multiple requests for certified BSE-free meat. When told that the USDA forbade independent testing, one of his customers responded incredulously, “If people want to have their beef tested, they should be able to. Isn't this how the free market works?”

The answer is, well, sometimes. The Virus Serum Toxin Act of 1913 gives the USDA ultimate authority to decide how to manage certain types of potential health threats among livestock. So while farms can do their own testing for drug or bacterial contaminations, BSE testing is off limits. The USDA says that private testing holds too many risk for the industry. Allowing individual farms to test and then market their beef as “BSE-free” implies that eating untested meat is hazardous. The USDA also says it fears a further economic downturn for the industry if farms use BSE tests that give false positive results—even though false positives could be easily corrected with follow-up testing.

Many nongovernmental organizations, including the Center for Media & Democracy, point out that the USDA's testing regime seems to be designed to avoid finding genuine cases of BSE. Last year, just over 20,000 cattle out of the 35 million slaughtered were tested for mad cow disease. In mid-March, the USDA announced plans to test up to 268,000 cattle over the next 12 to 18 months—still just a drop in the big beef bucket. And the vast majority of cattle to be tested (some 201,000) are those who died mysteriously or are exhibiting signs of disease or neurological damage, animals that have already been removed from the human food supply.

The increasing tension between the U.S. government's stonewalling and consumer demand highlights the USDA's conflicting goals: promoting the U.S. meat industry and protecting the public health threats. When Britain was dealing with its mad cow crisis nearly a decade ago, it scrapped a similarly compromised government agency and established a more independent body to oversee food safety. Unless the FDA and USDA adopt major policy changes soon, it may be time for the United States to do the same. ■

PUMPING IRONY

book excerpt from *Banana Republicans: How the Right Wing Is Turning America into a One-Party State*

For Jay Leno, it was a big night, scoring the highest Nielsen rating that *The Tonight Show* had seen for a Wednesday in more than four years. The big guest was movie musclemen Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was coming on the show to announce whether he would run in California's recall election against Governor Gray Davis. The buzz had been in the air for weeks. A month and half earlier, when Schwarzenegger visited the show to promote his latest film, *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, Leno had playfully introduced him as "the next governor from the great state of California." And although Arnold's advisors had been hinting lately that the star was planning to forgo his shot at electoral office, Arnold had a surprise in store.

Bounding onstage, Schwarzenegger began with a warm-up joke, quipping that his decision was the most difficult in his career since his 1978 dilemma whether to get a bikini wax. Then he got serious. "The politicians are fiddling, fumbling and failing," Schwarzenegger said. "The man that is failing the people more than anyone is Gray Davis. He is failing them terribly, and this is why he needs to be recalled, and this is why I am going to run for governor." The announcement prompted whoops and cheers from Leno's studio audience, and Schwarzenegger rewarded them with some of the lines he had made famous in his movies. "Say *hasta la vista* to Gray Davis," he said, promising to "pump up Sacramento."

He also paraphrased a line from another movie—the 1976 film, *Network*. The people of California, Schwarzenegger said, were "mad as hell, and we're not going to take it anymore."

Written by Paddy Chayefsky, *Network* is a satire about television sensationalism run amok. In the movie, Peter Finch plays Howard Beale, a deranged newscaster who has rejuvenated his network's ratings by promising to kill himself live in front of the cameras. Instead of committing suicide, though, Beale urges his viewers to join him

How the Right Wing Is Turning America into a One-Party State

BANANA REPUBLICANS



Sheldon Rampton & John Stauber

bestselling authors of *Weapons of Mass Deception*

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in chanting that they are "mad as hell," and a cult-like movement forms around his diatribes against "the system." Ironically, Beale's anger eventually becomes a predictable television ritual, his ratings drop again, and the network itself arranges to have him killed. The movie's message was that even when the public gets "mad as hell," nothing changes in the end. It was a grim and cynical cinematic statement—almost as cynical as Schwarzenegger's seemingly non-ironic use of Beale's line.

By all accounts, Arnold Schwarzenegger is a shrewd man, and his remarks on *The Tonight Show* were carefully crafted. He made a point, for example, of getting out in front of the main criticisms that his campaign would encounter. "I know that they're going to throw everything at me—I am a womanizer, no experience, a terrible guy," Schwarzenegger said. "We all know that Gray Davis can run a dirty campaign better than anyone, but we also know he doesn't know how to run a state."

Months previously, Schwarzenegger's approach had been spelled out by Republican pollster Frank Luntz, who conducted focus-group research for the party's "Rescue

California" campaign to recall Davis. In a memo to "Rescue California," Luntz outlined 17 ways to "kill Davis softly." It was important, he advised, to "trash the governor," but, "Issues are less important than attributes and character traits in your recall effort." Accordingly, Schwarzenegger carefully avoided mentioning the budget or raising any policy questions during his Leno appearance, sticking to Luntz-tested lines such as, "Do your job for the people and do it well, otherwise you are '*hasta la vista*, baby!'"

There is an art to "going negative" in political campaigns. Gray Davis was indeed an unpopular governor facing a voter backlash in a bleak economic year, and his centrist policies had alienated Democrats as much as Republicans. He had won re-election against Bill Simon less than a year before the recall drive began, but the race

was marked by ugly mudslinging on both sides that left voters disgusted and gave his opponents plenty of material to use against him. Campaign consultants often advise that the best way to go negative is to find a light-hearted way to do it, preferably with a bit of humor. As Democratic campaign operative Deno Seder explains, humor “induces the flow of endorphins and other brain hormones, creating a sense of well-being or euphoria. ... Such ‘statements’ can cripple the opposition, yet they leave the viewer with a pleasant feeling, not the bitter aftertaste that often accompanies sober attack ads. Instead of earning the resentment of the targeted audience for presenting a ‘downer,’ leaving them laughing creates a feeling of goodwill toward the sponsor, while actually accentuating the sting of the attack on the opponent. We all know that when Jay Leno or David Letterman starts making jokes about a candidate, the effect can be devastating.”

Schwarzenegger, however, was *on* Jay Leno, and he had the audience laughing *with* him. Calling Davis “fiddling, fumbling and failing” was itself a negative attack, but in the jovial context of the Leno show, it didn’t feel negative. And by being the person to bring up the allegations of his inexperience and womanizing, Schwarzenegger was inoculating voters against his most obvious weaknesses as a candidate. Two years previously, *Premiere* magazine had published a report that described him as a womanizer and recounted numerous instances in which he had allegedly groped or otherwise harassed women without their consent. Schwarzenegger had originally considered running for governor in the regular 2002 election, but had declined after Davis strategist Gary South launched a pre-emptive strike by blast-faxing copies of the *Premiere* piece around to reporters.

THE RUNNING MAN

Schwarzenegger’s declaration on *The Tonight Show* may have appeared off-the-cuff and spontaneous, but months of planning and preparation had gone into both the recall petition that made his election possible and the campaign itself. Conventional wisdom suggests that Republican presidential candidates write off left-leaning California’s 54 electoral votes, but such a substantial prize is hard to ignore. An associate of top Bush strategist Karl Rove calls the state “Karl’s Ahab.” Aside from the ambition of winning California in the presidential race, the party stood to benefit in other ways by electing Schwarzenegger, such as an increase in Republican voter registration with the potential to influence future elections. It also forces Democratic presidential candidates to spend more time and money in the state in 2004. “We

can distract the opposition long enough to make them vulnerable elsewhere on the national political landscape,” said California Republican strategist Dan Schnur. Long-time Republican strategist Kenneth L. Khachigian, who worked with recall backer and bankroller Congressman Darrell Issa, characterized the recall as “fundamentally a conservative Republican mainstream movement. That’s where all the momentum and energy behind the recall comes from.” Several other California GOP leaders, including former state legislator Howard Kaloogian, political consultant Sal Russo, and strategist David Gilliard, worked hard on the recall drive. Schwarzenegger’s proclaimed liberal views on social issues such as abortion and gay rights were accepted by party activists as pragmatic necessities in California’s cultural environment. As conservative strategist Matt Cunningham explained, “When a man is lost in the desert and dying of thirst, he’s not going to insist on Perrier.”

One of several Republican Party figures cheering Schwarzenegger in *The Tonight Show* studio was political consultant George Gorton. A year previously, Gorton had directed Schwarzenegger’s campaign for Proposition 49—a noncontroversial measure providing grants for after-school programs—which many political insiders saw as a planned precursor to a future run for governor. Two weeks before the announcement on Leno, in fact, the *Political Pulse*, a newsletter of California politics, published a report by Anthony York noting that Schwarzenegger had recently raised nearly half a million dollars in new money for his already-concluded Prop. 49 campaign. “Is money in the Prop. 49 kitty going to be used for the upcoming governor’s race?” York asked, adding, “At the very least, the fundraising does prime the pump.”

Two months prior to his appearance on *The Tonight Show*, Schwarzenegger supporters conducted focus groups in San Francisco and the San Fernando Valley to determine participants’ views of the actor and of Davis. The results guided a media strategy that more closely paralleled PR blitzes around Schwarzenegger’s major movies than most political campaigns. Capitalizing on the uniquely short time frame of the recall election, it was a remarkably controlled and image-focused campaign. Voters in California—the most populous and one of the most diverse states in the country—had only two months to decide whether they wanted to recall Governor Davis and, if so, which of the more than 130 registered candidates should replace him.

Schwarzenegger required all of the aides and consultants to his campaign to sign a five-page confidentiality agreement. The agreement, which itself was supposed to

be confidential (but leaked anyway to the *Los Angeles Times*), stated that Schwarzenegger “is a public figure and substantial effort and expense have been dedicated to limit the constant efforts of the press, other media and the public to learn of personal and business affairs” in which he was involved. Campaign aides agreed not to “take any photographs, movies, videos, or make any sketches, depictions or other likenesses of Arnold Schwarzenegger or Arnold Schwarzenegger’s family, friends, associates or employees, all of which constitute confidential information.” They also agreed not to divulge “financial, business, medical, legal, personal and contractual matters” and “any letter, memorandum, contract, photograph, film or other document or writing pertaining in any way” to Schwarzenegger “or any Related Parties.” Nondisclosure agreements of this type are common in Hollywood but unusual for political candidates.

Newspapers and more serious television news shows were, for the most part, ignored by the Schwarzenegger camp, which waited until 30 days into his campaign before agreeing to his first interview with California newspapers. Instead, carefully crafted yet vague messages were relayed to the public via entertainment-focused venues such as *Access Hollywood*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Howard Stern Show* and *Larry King Live*. According to Sean Walsh, the campaign’s co-director of communications, “We ran away from the established media. We went to the real mass media. We make no apologies for doing lots of radio or TV. It gave us five, seven, eight minutes of unfiltered opportunities to get out our message every day.”

The campaign finale was an elaborate bus tour through the state, with journalists in tow. Each bus was named after a different Schwarzenegger film—“The Running Man” for Schwarzenegger himself and his immediate retinue, “Total Recall” for VIP tagalongs, and four buses for reporters, dubbed “Predator 1-4” by the campaign staff. Writing in the conservative *Weekly Standard*, Matt Labash called the caravan “the No Talk Express—in which he invites hundreds of access-starved journos along for the ride, then essentially tells them to buzz off. . . . Since it is fairly clear early on that access to Arnold will be next to nil, journalists interview other journalists from foreign countries.”

The campaign was dominated by slogans parroting his movie tag lines: “I’ll be back,” or “Gray Davis has terminated opportunities! Now it is time that we terminate him!” The campaign even had its own special effect: a giant wrecking ball, used at a campaign stop to crush a car as a way of dramatizing Schwarzenegger’s opposition to the state’s auto tax.

As Schwarzenegger had anticipated on Leno, one of the areas that did come under scrutiny was his long-standing reputation as a womanizer. Reports of his rough handling of women were prominent in Wendy Leigh’s 1990 book, *Arnold: An Unauthorized Biography*. According to Leigh, the actor’s publicity team had responded to the book with lawsuits, threats and efforts to sabotage the book’s publicity campaign. The 2001 report in *Premiere* magazine also left questions hanging about the candidate’s character. The truncated time frame of the recall campaign, however, left little time for further investigations.

The *Los Angeles Times* conducted its own investigation and compiled a list of 15 women with stories of sexual harassment. The *Times* was able to find corroboration of each woman’s story, either from independent witnesses or from friends or relatives who said the women had told them of the incidents long before Schwarzenegger’s run for governor. The *Times* report, however, did not appear until the last week of the campaign and was quickly dismissed by the Schwarzenegger camp as a smear orchestrated by Davis. In its own bit of last-minute smearing, the Schwarzenegger campaign circulated an e-mail attacking the character of Rhonda Miller, a stunt-woman who said she had been manhandled on the set of *Terminator 2*. The e-mail pointed reporters to the website of a Los Angeles Superior Court, which showed that Rhonda Miller had an extensive rap sheet for theft, forgery, drugs and prostitution. After the election, it turned out that the felon in question was a different Rhonda Miller.

If anything, the reports of Schwarzenegger’s sexual misconduct may have helped rather than hindered the campaign. More than 1,000 *Times* readers cancelled their subscriptions, accusing the paper of last-minute partisan attacks—a charge that editor John S. Carroll vigorously disputes, calling the stories “solid as Gibraltar” and noting that publishing them earlier would have been impossible given the amount of research needed to confirm them. “It was a daunting feat to get all this accomplished during the 62 days of Schwarzenegger’s campaign, a year less time than we’d have to cover a normal gubernatorial race,” Carroll wrote. The *Times*, he said, understood that publishing it late in the campaign was likely to “touch off an outcry against the newspaper. We had no illusion that it would be warmly received.” But the only other options were either to “never publish it,” which “could be justified only if the story were untrue or insignificant,” or to “hold it and publish after the election,” which would “prompt anger among citizens who expect the newspaper to treat them

like adults and give them all the information it has before they cast their votes.”

Like the campaign itself, Schwarzenegger’s victory celebration resembled a Hollywood gala as much as anything political. The crowd surrounding him at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles could have been the receiving line at an NBC promotion. Prominent faces at the celebration included his wife, *Dateline NBC* correspondent Maria Shriver; actor Rob Lowe of NBC’s *Lyon’s Den*; and Pat O’Brien of NBC’s *Access Hollywood*. The man who announced his victory and introduced him to the crowd of cheering supporters was Jay Leno. And the following night, Schwarzenegger made another appearance on *The Tonight Show*, this time as governor-elect. During his unbilled but clearly preplanned appearance, Leno’s band played “Happy Days Are Here Again” while the studio audience chanted, “Arnold! Arnold!”

NBC representative Rebecca Marks attempted to play down the impression that the network had thrown its support behind the man now called California’s “governor.” Leno’s election-night introduction, Marks said, “was something he agreed to do with Arnold as a friend. He was not in any way endorsing him politically. It was a personal appearance.”

Marty Kaplan, associate dean of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication, disagreed. “What Leno’s presence did is give legitimacy to the notion that it wasn’t a partisan event, it wasn’t a political event, it was somehow an American cultural event,” Kaplan said. “It was like welcoming home an astronaut from a safe voyage. In so doing, it played into a campaign strategy that this was a campaign for all, beyond politics. Which is not true; he’s a Republican candidate. ... It gives the impression of taking it out of the political realm into an extraterrestrial domain where politics don’t matter, where we’re all friends. It puts people who value dispute and debate [into the position] where we’re all seen as earthly and petty, as if we should get with the program.”

DANCING ELEPHANTS

Conservatives frequently decry the “liberal bias” of the mass media. The grain of truth in their complaint is that people who work in the entertainment and news industries—television, movies, popular music, books, magazines and newspapers—tend to lean Democratic. People from these industries give about two-thirds of their campaign contributions to Democrats, and one-third to Republicans. People who work in the media are different in this regard from many other leading corpo-

rate sectors such as oil, livestock, trucking, chemicals, tobacco, railroads and the automobile and restaurant industries, all of which give more than 70 percent of their contributions to Republicans. There is no shortage of liberal performers in Hollywood—Ed Asner, Martin Sheen, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Rob Reiner and Barbra Streisand, to name just a few. While vocal in their views, however, Democratic-leaning actors have rarely sought political office and have almost never held it, preferring to advance their views through activism, lobbying and the arts. By contrast, acting has been a stepping-stone to political careers for numerous Republicans. In addition to Arnold Schwarzenegger, examples include:

- George Murphy, an actor, dancer and former president of the Screen Actors Guild who served as a U.S. senator from California from 1965 to 1971.
- Ronald Reagan, the former governor of California and two-term president of the United States.
- Clint Eastwood, who served two years as mayor of Carmel, California in the 1980s.
- Fred Grandy, who played the character of Gopher on the TV sitcom *The Love Boat* before serving as a congressman from the state of Iowa from 1986 to 1995.
- Sonny Bono, who followed his split from Cher by becoming the mayor of Palm Springs, California, followed by his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994.
- Fred Thompson, who was elected to the U.S. Senate from Tennessee in 1994 following an acting career that included roles in films such as *In the Line of Fire* and *The Hunt for Red October* (and, more recently, the district attorney role on NBC’s *Law and Order*).

Following Schwarzenegger’s declaration of his candidacy, *Backstage*, a professional magazine for actors, published a story on actors who had run successfully for political office, but the only example it cited from the Democratic side was Sheila Kuhn, a California state senator who many years previously had been a child actor on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (from which she was fired when CBS discovered that she was a lesbian). We were able to find only one other example—Ben Jones, who played the character of Cooter on the *Dukes of Hazard* and then served two terms as a Democratic U.S. congressman from Georgia before losing in 1992.

There are several reasons for this disparity. One is that the Republican Party has actively recruited and supported candidates from the entertainment world. Another is that Republicans often run as “antigovernment” or “nonpolitician” candidates, so that an actor’s lack of political experience can actually be an advantage

for his campaign. And although Bill Clinton was clearly a master of showmanship, for the most part Republicans have shown greater mastery of the rules of postmodern politics, in which style is as important as substance and issues are less important than personality. Republican candidates understand these unwritten rules because they and their campaign consultants, some of whom actually started in the entertainment industry, played a big part in inventing them.

“The average American doesn’t want to be educated, he doesn’t want to improve his mind, he doesn’t even want to work consciously at being a good citizen. But every American likes to be entertained. . . . So, if you can’t put on a fight, put on a show.”

It is no accident that several of the names on the list above came from California. The first political-campaign firm in the United States, Campaigns Inc., was also established in California in the 1930s by the husband-and-wife team of Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter. Whitaker and Baxter drew on the culture of nearby Hollywood as they developed techniques for “selling” candidates through the mass media. Incumbent California governor Frank Merriam hired Whitaker and Baxter to defeat a 1934 election challenge by muckraking journalist and social reformer Upton Sinclair. Whitaker and Baxter developed a smear campaign to defeat Sinclair, arranging to have false stories printed in newspapers about Sinclair seducing young girls. To combat Sinclair’s Depression-era populism, they worked with Hollywood studios, which controlled movie theaters throughout the state, to place phony newsreels in cinemas featuring fictional “Sinclair supporters” in rags advocating a Soviet-style takeover.

After their victory, Whitaker and Baxter explained the cynical philosophy behind their success: “The average American doesn’t want to be educated, he doesn’t want to improve his mind, he doesn’t even want to work consciously at being a good citizen. But every American likes to be entertained. He likes the movies, he likes mysteries; he likes fireworks and parades. So, if you can’t put on a fight, put on a show.” In Whitaker’s words, they transformed elections from “a hit or miss business, directed by broken-down politicians” into “a mature, well-managed business founded on sound public rela-

tions principles, and using every technique of modern advertising.”

Whitaker and Baxter were in turn succeeded by another Californian, Murray Chotiner, who took Richard Nixon under his wing in 1945 and groomed him in the techniques of political campaigning. Nixon’s career spanned the rise of television as a new medium that transformed both entertainment and politics. “It was Nixon’s television performance in his Checkers speech that saved his place as Dwight Eisenhower’s running mate in 1952,” notes historian David Greenberg, the author of *Nixon’s Shadow: The History of an Image*. “In a historic piece of image-craft, Nixon talked earnestly about his onerous childhood and his struggles upon returning from the Navy—and adorned his speech with folksy touches about his wife’s cloth coat and his daughters’ cocker spaniel. So effective was his self-portrait that telegrams flooded in to the studio praising his sincerity, forcing Eisenhower to retain him. Only a handful of liberal critics dissented, warning that Nixon was using insidious new techniques to misrepresent himself—and endanger democracy. But Nixon innovated further.” Following his defeat in the 1960s election against John F. Kennedy, Nixon set out to reinvent himself, hiring professional image manipulators including William Safire, then a New York public relations executive; advertising executives H.R. Haldeman and Harry Treleaven; and television producer Roger Ailes (currently the head of Fox News). Long before Bill Clinton played the saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* or Arnold Schwarzenegger traded quips with Jay Leno, Nixon paved the way by appearing on the comedy show *Laugh-In* to say “Sock it to me” as part of his 1968 campaign strategy for overcoming his humorless image.

Before Roger Ailes met Nixon, he was an executive producer of *The Mike Douglas Show*, a popular TV talk and variety program. They met in 1967, while Nixon was waiting to appear as a guest on the show. “It’s a shame a man has to use gimmicks like this to get elected,” Nixon said.

“Television is not a gimmick,” Ailes replied, and Nixon hired him.

The problem for the Nixon campaign, Ailes said, is that “a lot of people think Nixon is dull. Think he’s a bore, a pain in the ass. They think he’s the kind of kid who always carried a book bag. . . . Now you put him on television, you’ve got a problem right away. He’s a funny-looking guy. He looks like somebody put him in a closet overnight and he jumps out in the morning with his suit all bunched up and starts running around saying,

'I want to be President.' I mean this is how he strikes some people."

To change this image, the campaign paid to produce a series of television shows, in which Nixon fielded questions from panels of citizens. Although the shows were broadcast live, both the audiences and the panel were prescreened by the campaign, chosen carefully to have the right demographics—just enough blacks, for example, but not *too* many. Panel members were chosen so they would ask just enough tough questions to make the shows feel spontaneous, and since the audience was all Republican, applause was guaranteed.

"The audience is part of the show," Ailes said during a discussion with Harry Treleven about whether to allow reporters to watch the tapings. "And that's the whole point. Our television show. And the press has no business on the set. And goddammit, Harry, the problem is that this is an electronic election. The first there's ever been. TV has the power now. Some of the guys get arrogant and rub the reporters' faces in it and then the reporters get pissed and go out of their way to rap anything they consider staged for TV. And you know damn well that's what they'd do if they saw this from the studio. You let them in there with the regular audience and they see the warmup. They see Jack Rourke [the show's warm-up man] out there telling the audience to applaud and to mob Nixon at the end, and that's all they'd write about it."

In 1968, Nixon's success in reinventing himself as the "New Nixon" helped him win the White House. When journalist Joe McGinniss detailed this strategy the next year in *The Selling of the President*, shamefaced reporters vowed to get wise to such manipulation, but the Nixon campaign was just the beginning. Although his impeachment in the Watergate scandal meant a temporary setback, the Republicans roared back into the White House in 1980 with Ronald Reagan, the first actor ever to become president. Reagan also relied on the talents of Ailes, who served as a consultant to his 1984 re-election campaign. Ailes oversaw production of the now legendary "Morning in America" campaign television ads, designed by Madison Avenue executive Philip Dusenberry and featuring swelling violin music and emotional, issue-free imagery of weddings, flag-raising, home-buying and peaceful, scenic vistas.

Ailes used a similar strategy in 1988, when he worked with Lee Atwater to mastermind George H.W. Bush's come-from-behind victory over Michael Dukakis. The Bush/Quayle '88 campaign combined morning-in-America imagery with ads that ridiculed Dukakis through deceptive visual imagery. One TV spot took

Dukakis to task for pollution in Boston Harbor, displaying a sign that said, "Danger/Radiation Hazard/No Swimming." The sign actually had nothing to do with pollution or Dukakis. It was posted to warn Navy personnel not to swim in waters that had once harbored nuclear submarines under repair.

The most egregious ads, however, used visual imagery to exploit racial feelings. One featured a threatening photograph of William Horton, a black inmate who had escaped from a prison-furlough program and raped a woman, to suggest that Dukakis was unusually soft on crime. (Actually, Massachusetts was one of 45 states with prison furlough programs at the time of Horton's crime.) A second prison-furlough ad depicted a "revolving door" through which a line of white men entered prison, while blacks and Hispanics exited. "That phrase 'revolving-door prison policy' implies, of course, that Massachusetts criminals could, thanks to Governor Dukakis, slip out of jail as easily as commuters streaming from a subway station," observes Mark Crispin Miller. "But the image makes an even more inflammatory statement. . . . The 'revolving door' effects an eerie racial metamorphosis, implying that the Dukakis prison system was not only porous, but a satanic source of negritude—a dark 'liberal' mill that took white men and made them colored."

TRUE LIES

By its nature, television is expensive to produce and broadcast (although that may be changing, thanks to the Internet and other technological advances). It therefore lends itself to control by the people who can afford to pay for the considerable costs of production. It is also a highly emotional medium. Unlike print, which requires that the audience make a conscious effort, television is often absorbed unconsciously, as pure images and background in our information environment.

Reporter Leslie Stahl tells a story in her memoir, *Reporting Live*, of an experience she had in 1984 when she broadcast a piece for the CBS *Evening News* about the gap between rhetoric and reality under the Reagan administration. She juxtaposed images of staged photo opportunities in which Reagan picnicked with ordinary folks or surrounded himself with black children, farmers and happy flag-waving supporters. These images, she pointed out, often conflicted with the nature of Reagan's actual policies.

"Mr. Reagan tries to counter the memory of an unpopular issue with a carefully chosen backdrop that actually contradicts the president's policy," she said in her *Evening News* piece. "Look at the handicapped

Olympics, or the opening ceremony of an old-age home. No hint that he tried to cut the budgets for the disabled or for federally subsidized housing for the elderly.”

Stahl’s piece was so hard-hitting in its criticism of Reagan, she recalled, that she “worried that my sources at the White House would be angry enough to freeze me out.” Much to her shock, however, she received a phone call immediately after the broadcast from White House aide Richard Darman. He was calling from the office of Treasury Secretary Jim Baker, who had just watched the piece along with White House press secretary Mike Deaver and Baker’s assistant, Margaret Tutwiler. Rather than complaining, they were calling to *thank* her. “Way to go, kiddo,” Darman said. “What a great story! We loved it.”

“Excuse me?” Stahl replied, thinking he must be joking.

“No, no, we really loved it,” Darman insisted. “Five minutes of free media. We owe you big time.”

“Why are you so happy?” Stahl said. “Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Nobody heard what you said,” Darman replied.

“Come again?”

“You guys in Televisionland haven’t figured it out, have you? When the pictures are powerful and emotional, they override if not completely drown out the sound. Lesley, I mean it, nobody heard you.”

Stahl was so taken aback that she played a videotape of her segment before a live audience of a hundred people and asked them what they had just seen. Sure enough, Darman was right. “Most of the audience thought it was either an ad for the Reagan campaign or a very positive news story,” Stahl recalls. “Only a handful heard what I said. The pictures were so evocative—we’re talking about pictures with Reagan in the shining center—that all the viewers were absorbed. Unlike reading or listening to the radio, with the television we ‘learn’ with two of our senses together, and apparently the eye is dominant. When we watch television, we get an emotional reaction. The information doesn’t always go directly to the thinking part of our brains but to the gut. It’s all about impressions, and the White House understood that.”

The George W. Bush administration also understands this lesson. At the Republican National Convention that nominated Bush in 2000, only 4 percent of the actual delegates were black, compared to 20 percent at the Democratic Convention, but the talent onstage looked quite different: not just Colin Powell, but comedian Chris Black, the Temptations, a gospel choir, rhythm and blues and salsa singers, and Representative J.C. Watts (the only black Republican in Congress). “It’s all visuals,” Karl Rove told campaign finance chief Don Evans. “You campaign as if America was watching TV with the sound turned down.” ■

10 YEARS OF PR WATCH

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our 1997 book *Mad Cow USA* has been re-released. This issue features the book’s new forward, “How Now, Mad Cow?,” and a short piece on the USDA’s blocking private testing for mad cow disease, titled “Where’s the (BSE-Free) Beef?”

As we enter our second decade, we’ve added three new staff members: Diane Farsetta, who does research, writing and development work; Kristian Knutsen, who does grass-roots outreach and manages our office; and Bob Burton, who edits Disinfopedia. We are expanding the Center’s work and taking important information to an even wider audience.

At the end of May, we have another book hitting the shelves—*Banana Republicans: How the Right Wing is Turning America into a One-Party State*. We’ve included an excerpt in this issue, “Pumping Irony,” which looks at box-office muscleman Arnold Schwarzenegger’s latest starring role as governor of California.

This summer and fall, John Stauber and Sheldon Ramp-ton will be speaking at events across the country promoting *Banana Republicans* and highlighting the Center’s work. We’re also holding meet-the-author events in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. And in our hometown of Madison, Wisconsin, we are excitedly looking forward to our tenth anniversary celebration with Amy Goodman, host of Pacifica’s *Democracy Now!*, on June 18. We would love to see you at one of these events. Supporters from around the country can also be recognized during our tenth anniversary celebration. For more information, see our website, call us at 608-260-9713 or email diane@prwatch.org.

In our decade of covering the public relations and public affairs industry, we’ve seen time and time again how corporate, political, and ideological groups distort issues, confuse voters, and manipulate public opinion to serve their own interests. We hope our work is an antidote, promoting citizen education and action, and challenging the media to do more than just recite the PR story line.