

Times Warp

How *The Washington Times* twisted the *Prospect's* interview with Bill Clinton

by Michael Tomasky

Virtually any day of the week, you can pick up *The Washington Times* and count on its writers to reflect a view of reality not far removed from that of the Republican National Committee. Everyone understands they do that; it's their printing press and it's their right. What I didn't think they also did, however, at least until I picked up today's edition, was willfully misread documents.

For the November issue of this magazine, I interviewed Bill Clinton. The subjects of the interview were how the Democrats can win in 2004, how they can counter Republican arguments and where George W. Bush is vulnerable.

The Washington Times's Donald Lambro wrote a news article about the interview in today's paper. Hey, I'm not complaining; he picked up the story, and he spelled the magazine's name right. But reading his account, I'm left wondering whether someone doctored his copy of the magazine.

His lead reads, "Former President Bill Clinton says that the Democratic presidential candidates cannot win the White House if voters think they are too far to the left, according to an interview published this week."

Uh, as the guy who was in the room, I'm here to tell you: That is not what Clinton said. It reflects about one-third of what he said. He also said, explicitly, that Democrats should defend government and that they should accuse Republicans of practicing "class warfare." Let me summarize it like this: As we were preparing the interview for print and I was wondering how the mainstream newspapers might play it, I figured the story would be something like, "Clinton, accusing GOP of 'class warfare,' says Democrats must stroke the base as well as the center." So how did the exact opposite come out? I have my theories, but first, more evidence.

The *Times* picked up this quote: "But I don't believe that either side should be saying, 'I'm a real Democrat and the other one's not,' or, 'I'm a winning Democrat and the other one's not.'" The *Times* account suggested that this was an implicit slam of Howard Dean.

Here's the whole context: I asked Clinton about the schism within the Democratic Party. I said to him that sometimes the arguments between the liberals and the centrists had taken on a tone of not mere disagreement but of mockery. "And this has happened," I said, "more from the centrists toward the liberals than the other way around," at which point he cut me off and said, "Yeah, and I think it's a big mistake."

Now how is that an implicit criticism of Dean? An agreement that the centrists have sometimes gone overboard in criticisms of liberals is pretty obviously an implicit criticism of Joe Lieberman and Al From, the head of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). If Clinton hadn't cut me off, I would have mentioned the DLC's attack on Iowa delegates awhile back, or the letter the DLC wrote to the attendees of a conference sponsored by the Campaign for America's Future, the DLC's liberal counterpart, with its silly joke about how they should all enjoy their Ben & Jerry's ice cream. I didn't get to say those things, but Bill Clinton is no dummy; he knew exactly what I was talking about, and exactly what he was saying.

Second: The *Times* account says that Clinton "offered plenty of advice to his party's declared candidates on how they could run a winning campaign, urging them to follow his own centrist playbook that won him the presidency in 1992." He did? Read this exchange:

MT: You, in 1992, given where the Democratic Party had been, made certain steps in the direction of showing you were willing to reject

some old nostrums. But is that as necessary a politics today as it was in 1992?

BC: No, I think it has to be done differently today.

Clinton then went on to say that Democrats should “pocket some of the gains” he made by reminding voters that the Democrats *had* moved to the center on welfare reform and fiscal responsibility. Fair enough. But then he added that that work has already been done, saying, “I don’t think we have to do as much conscious adding to the base in the way I did it.” And *then* he said, “My theory was that class warfare wouldn’t take us very far” in 1992, but that “now what we should say is that they, not we, have brought class warfare back to America.” In other words, he said precisely, and at length, that Democrats can’t simply do what he did in 1992, and that on at least one specific question—the rhetoric of “class warfare”—they should do the opposite!

Finally, we got into an exchange about how the Democrats could counter Bush’s claim to voters, with regard to tax cuts, that it’s their money, not Washington’s. Here, Clinton said Democrats should make the explicit case that only the federal government can do certain things, which neither the private sector nor charity will or can accomplish. “So I think we ought to say,” he said, “‘It’s your money, and it’s your *country*. What kind of country do you want?’”

I’m not arguing here that Bill Clinton has suddenly become George McGovern. Far from it. But he did say this: The historical situation has changed since 1992, and Democrats need to recognize that what worked for him then isn’t necessarily the formula for success next year. And he said that both wings of the Democratic Party, centrists very much included, need to cool it and start acting like they’re on the same team.

And *that*, finally, is what interests me about how the *Times* wrote up this interview. Maybe it was just an innocent misreading—Bill Clinton is, after all, so fixed in the mind of mainstream journalism as the centrist tiger and the scourge of the liberal left that maybe Lambro just couldn’t help reading it through that lens, seeing what he wanted and expected to see.

But somehow I doubt that. Lambro’s a smart guy. Positioning Clinton’s remarks as an attack on Dean, when they in fact were not, may mean that the Republicans are suddenly worried about Dean. That’s speculation. I’m on safer ground in asserting that the *Times* has a vested interest in throwing gasoline on the fire of internal Democratic divisions—divisions that Clinton, in this interview, sought to quell—and keeping that story line alive above all else. And maybe that means that the person the Republicans are really worried about is Bush.