

## REVIEW

**Strictly Business**

By Paul Krugman

*Bushwhacked: Life in George W. Bush's America*  
by Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose  
Random House, 347 pp., \$24.95

*Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth*  
by Joe Conason  
Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's, 245 pp., \$24.95

**1.**

On a recent Friday afternoon, the Interior Department announced a change in rules for U.S. mining companies. (They always announce the outrages on Friday afternoon, because few people read the Saturday papers or watch the Saturday TV news.) Reversing a Clinton-era decision, Interior now says that companies mining precious metals can appropriate as much federal land as they want to dump the waste from their operations—and modern mining techniques generate a great deal of waste. Environmentalists were appalled, not just because of the direct effect on the landscape, but because chemicals can leach out of the exposed waste, polluting a much wider area.

To understand why and how officials made that decision—and why we needn't waste time parsing the administration's claims that it was all about promoting economic growth—it helps to have read Chapter 9 of *Bushwhacked*, by Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose. That chapter, entitled “Dick, Dubya, and Wyoming Methane,” tells you all you need to know about the Bush Interior Department. We learn, in particular, that J. Steven Griles, the deputy secretary—and probably the real power in the department—has spent his career shuttling back and forth between being a government official and lobbying for the extractive industries. And he has never worried much about ethical niceties—little things like recusing himself from decisions that affect his former clients. Moreover, Griles isn't likely to be disciplined, even when he brazenly supports industry interests over the judgments of government experts. After all, just about every other senior official at Interior, including Secretary Gale Norton, has a similar résumé.

So it's a very good bet that the new rules on mining-waste disposal don't reflect a careful economic analysis of the pros and cons. Nor, by the way, do they represent a general ideological bias in favor of free markets and private property, since this wasn't a ruling about what companies can do on their own property. It was a major extension of their rights to make private use of public land. Or to put it another way, this decision was about extending corporate privilege, not protecting property rights. Needless to say, this particular extension of privilege was worth a lot of money to a select group of mining companies—a very nice return on their prior investment in the Bush administration, not just through campaign contributions, but through deals that enriched individual government officials.

The point about the mining-waste ruling is that it isn't at all exceptional. Instead, it is typical of the Bush administration—in its callousness toward the general welfare, in the brazenness with which special interests were able to buy a decision to their liking, and in the contempt officials showed toward the public and the press. (Indeed, the ruling received only brief mention in the national press.) We're living in a replay of the Gilded Age, in which robber barons openly bought and sold government officials and

their policies. And just as the Gilded Age brought forth a golden age of muckraking, our modern descent into money politics has brought forth a new wave of outraged reporters. Ivins and Dubose are worthy heirs of an honorable tradition.

## 2.

Ivins and Dubose are, of course, not alone. Indeed, this is the season of the angry liberal. You might think that with all the books out there—Al Franken’s *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*, Joe Conason’s *Big Lies*, David Corn’s *The Lies of George W. Bush*, and even my own column collection—there would be a lot of repetition. Yet the Bush era provides, as my *New York Times* colleague Thomas Friedman says, a “target-rich environment.” While there is some overlap between the liberal books of this fall, each book focuses on a different piece of the picture.

In *Bushwhacked*, Ivins and Dubose spend some time on what we might call the macro-economics of Bushism—the administration’s repeated tax cuts for the wealthy in the face of exploding budget deficits, its foot-dragging over such basic measures as extending unemployment benefits in the face of a prolonged jobless “recovery.” But that sort of thing isn’t the authors’ forte, and their hearts clearly aren’t in it; they’re best at the telling individual example. Even when discussing macroeconomics, they try to frame it by telling individual stories, and there is a sense of relief when they turn to more human-scale outrages.

The book’s core consists of a series of muckraking case studies, ranging from ergonomics and toxic waste to food safety and education scams. It’s worth looking at a couple of those cases, just to get a sense of how much muck there is to rake.

The chapter on ergonomics—i.e., regulations to prevent injuries from poor working conditions—is startling, not so much for the what and the how as for the who. There we learn about the career of Eugene Scalia, now the Labor Department’s solicitor general. This is an appointment that should have raised eyebrows, even if the younger Scalia had a history of labor advocacy. Just to be blunt about it: here we have a president who reached office despite receiving fewer votes than his opponent, thanks to a highly questionable Supreme Court decision—and now a plum job goes to the son of the justice who muscled that decision through. Wow.

But it’s much worse than that. The younger Scalia isn’t just another of the many fortunate conservative sons (and daughters). He’s someone to be reckoned with in his own right, because he is, as Ivins and Dubose say, “the godfather of the anti-ergonomics movement.” As a lawyer representing business interests—that is, as a lobbyist with credentials—he was a relentless opponent of rules designed to protect workers from workplace injuries. More than that, he was tireless in his efforts to debunk the science of such injuries. And he was, of course, handsomely paid for his efforts—which did, indeed, succeed in delaying the Clinton administration’s attempt to establish ergonomics rules that would, for example, protect workers from repetitive stress ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, and serious injuries. Such delays prepared the ground for the Bush administration’s decision to forget about the whole thing. The fact that Scalia is now the Labor Department’s chief lawyer—the man who, in principle, represents worker interests in court—is the kind of thing a satirist would never dare invent.

Another story—one I didn’t know—is literally sickening. It’s the tale of health regulation in meat processing. (Echoes of history: one of the great books of the first age of muckraking was, of course, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, about the meatpacking industry.)

Bill Clinton, with his close ties to the Arkansas chicken industry, wasn’t particularly good on food safety issues in the early years of his presidency. But by the end his officials had devised and were on the verge of implementing regulations that would have

greatly reduced the risk of *Listeria* infections from such foods as ready-to-eat turkey. The Bush administration killed those regulations. It also, Ivins and Dubose's book suggests, introduced a new culture in the Agriculture Department, one in which warnings from official inspectors are disregarded, and in which the health of food consumers is definitely not a priority. "If you must eat while the R[epublican]s control the White House, both houses of Congress, and the judiciary," write the authors, "you might want to consider becoming a vegetarian about now."

And on it goes: toxic waste, insider trading, Enron, and all that. One might suspect that in order to fill out their book Ivins and Dubose have trotted out every damning story they could find about the Bush administration—every story that combines contempt for the public's welfare with unseemly financial and personal relations between industries that benefit from policy changes and the officials who made those changes. But while writing this review I decided to see how many similar or worse stories not covered in the book I could jot down on a piece of paper without even cracking a book or going online—and eventually realized that I could do this for quite a while. A sampler: the elimination of new source review, the provision of the 1977 Clean Air Act that requires older power plants to comply with modern pollution standards when they update their facilities; the go-ahead for nuclear waste disposal at Yucca; the corporate welfare in the Cheney energy plan; the combination of environmental havoc and corporate welfare in the "healthy forests" initiative ostensibly intended to reduce forest fires; the retroactive tax cuts for corporations in the 2001 stimulus plan; and, of course, Halliburton's no-bid \$1.3 billion and counting deal in Iraq.

The most striking feature of these stories is the rawness of it all. Never mind all that stuff you've read in the past about how political contributions buy "access," which allows interest groups to influence policy. The companies now riding high don't just contribute to Republican campaigns, they contribute directly to the personal wealth of future (and in some cases current) public officials. And they don't influence policy: they write it, directly.

The big question, of course, is "Why is this happening?" Not why they are doing this—greed springs eternal—but why they are able to get away with it. What happened to the outrage the press and the public are supposed to feel when government ceases to be run for their interests? That brings us to Joe Conason's complementary book.

### 3.

*Big Lies* is a less friendly book than *Bushwhacked*. This is not a criticism. To be frank, though I understand why Ivins and Dubose chose to mix their grim tales of corrupt politics with heartwarming tales of good ordinary folks, I would just as soon have drunk my coffee without the cream. Conason, by contrast, gives it straight: his book is a fairly unrelieved tract, whose theme is the triumph of hypocrisy. His claim is that the right-wing coalition now ruling our nation hardly ever practices what it preaches: that we're ruled by self-styled populists whose policies are relentlessly elitist, by people who declare their fiscal responsibility while breaking the bank, by people who stress "character" while pursuing private lives no better than anyone else's, and, above all, by "patriots" who would never think of making personal sacrifices for their country.

This can sound a bit heavy-handed, but *Big Lies* is by no means boring to read. In fact, it's gripping and in some places hilarious. For example, who knew that Rush Limbaugh, scourge of liberal elitists and hero of the "ditto-heads," informed *Cigar Aficionado* that his favorite Bordeaux is Château Haut Brion '61—a vintage that retails for about \$2,000 a bottle? (That's not just greedy. It's comically pretentious.) And Conason confirms some stories I thought were too good to be true, like the one about John Ashcroft and the Crisco:

Like the Old Testament kings of Israel, whose God-given mandate was marked by anointing their heads with holy oil, Ashcroft would kneel down to receive a similar blessing from his aging dad. Lacking holy oil on the evening before Ashcroft was to be sworn in as a senator in 1994, his father [a Pentecostal minister] instead rubbed the politician's forehead with a few dabs of Crisco while praying aloud.

More seriously, Conason gives the best accounts yet of the peculiar military and business career of George W. Bush, from his service—or lack thereof—in the Texas Air National Guard, to the deals that allowed a repeated failure in business to emerge as a multimillionaire. Bush, Conason writes, was admitted to the Texas Air National Guard “ahead of hundreds of other young men on the waiting list” and “despite his low score on the pilot aptitude test.” More surprisingly, he failed to report for duty for an entire year, between May 1972 and May 1973. By this point, he had already been suspended from flight duty and reassigned to an alternative unit because he failed to show up for an annual physical (Conason points out that a strict drug-testing policy had gone into effect a few months before Bush was to have his exam).

Highlights of Bush's business career include his sale of Harken Energy shares two months before the company announced losses of over \$20 million and its shares fell by 24 percent. “All the information Bush had about Harken's prospects at that point was negative,” Conason writes.

The firm was near bankruptcy. A year earlier, the Harken management had created a phony profit of \$10 million by selling some of the company's assets, at an inflated price, to Aloha Petroleum, a front company owned by company insiders. That maneuver, similar to what Enron did on a much larger scale a decade later, had preserved the Harken stock price for a while by concealing most of the company's losses.

Bush was investigated by the SEC for insider trading, but no action was taken. According to Conason, this is no surprise: then SEC chairman Richard Breeden “was an especially ardent Bush loyalist, and the agency's general counsel, James Doty, was the same Texas attorney who had handled the sale of the Rangers baseball team for George W.”

Incidentally, some squeamish liberals have condemned Conason for these tales, saying that we should limit ourselves to policy, not go after personality and past history. But I'm completely with Conason on this. After all, today's right wing flourishes in part by using the personal to distract voters from policy. Is a conservative politician a reliable friend of the privileged and well-connected? Never mind, let's talk about his sterling family life. Is a liberal politician spectacularly successful in his conduct of economic policy? But he had an affair! Even if you think that public debate ought to be about policy, not persons, it's necessary to defeat this strategy—and if exposing the dissonance between personal pretensions and reality is what it takes, go for it.

The main lesson of Conason's book, however, is that hypocrisy works. Phony populism convinces the public that the greedy rich are regular guys; whining about the “liberal media” helps to entrench a de facto conservative bias; noisy tirades about morality convince voters that liberals are sinners; flag pins in the lapels of draft dodgers let them question the patriotism of critics.

There's no doubt that he's right. Hypocrisy does work for today's right wing—and if you want a hard-hitting exposé of hypocrisy on multiple fronts, a guidebook to keep by your side as you wade through the muck of current politics, *Big Lies* is your book.

#### 4.

And yet. Ivins and Dubose track the outrages; Conason exposes the hypocrisy. But why is the public so easily manipulated? One answer is the supineness of much of the press, radio, and television, a fact documented by Conason. But that just pushes the question back a step. What is it about today's right that lets it bully the press so easily, that creates such an effective machine of propaganda, intimidation, and base mobilization?

Money is surely part of the story. Recent statistics confirm that income inequality in the United States has returned to Gilded Age levels; maybe, then, our newly empowered rich are in a position to buy themselves a return to Gilded Age politics. Religion is also part of the story: in effect, the religious right—a majority of whose adherents are very much losers in the new economic order—seems to have made a deal to support low taxes for the rich and weak regulation in return for a more Bible-friendly government. And 9/11 was, of course, the best gift the right could have wished for—a perfect occasion to shift politics to a permanent war footing, in which criticism of our leaders could be shouted down as unpatriotic. But the success of today's right, despite its manifest greediness and irresponsibility, remains a puzzle. And it's a puzzle we'd better solve soon, if we want to preserve the America we grew up in.

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