

The Road to Change: “Managing Chaos, Adventures in Alternative Media”, Greg Guma

By [Greg Guma](#)

Global Research, July 19, 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the Translate Website button below the author’s name (only available in desktop version).

To receive Global Research’s Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Click the share button above to email/forward this article to your friends and colleagues. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

[Spread the Truth, Refer a Friend to Global Research](#)

Shortly after helping to launch the Citizens Party, a new coalition linked with Barry Commoner’s 1980 environmental campaign for US President, I circulated a memo about next steps. It urged leaders of the Vermont chapter to focus on Burlington. The state’s largest city “can be extremely fertile ground,” I wrote in March 1980. Fiscal crisis, cronyism between the Democratic mayor and business leaders, youth unrest, skyrocketing rents — the city’s problems made it ripe for a political upheaval.

“In a three-way race, even a mayoral candidate might be elected,” I predicted.

At the time Bernie Sanders was beginning to organize low-income residents of Burlington’s Franklin Square housing project. He wanted to persuade college students, the elderly and low-income renters to press for affordable housing and tenants’ rights. He wasn’t yet thinking about running for local office.

I was still editing the Vanguard Press, but also beginning to plan a possible run for mayor. As I explained to a Washington Post reporter decades later, I knew that in a mayoral election, “if leftists had any chance of pulling off an upset, only one of them could be on the ballot.”

Even after Bernie announced, some urged me to go for it; they saw Sanders as a veteran candidate, good at reducing his ideas to plain English, but more a voice for change in statewide or national races. On Halloween night, however, three of his friends sat him down

in a laundry room for a frank talk about his future.

In a way, it was an intervention, one that had a profound effect on Vermont history.

As journalist Marc Fisher retold the story during Sanders' second presidential race, they said that he had no political future if he kept going on as he had.

“Sanders readily conceded that, having run for Vermont governor, twice, and for US Senate, twice, never winning more than 6 percent of the vote, he risked getting stuck on the fringe, perceived as a joke.”

He also had trouble connecting with the people around him.

“Without a steady job, he drove around the state in his Volkswagen Bug trying to sell teachers the films he had cobbled together about socialist Eugene V. Debs and other radicals.”

As he entered a second decade of campaigning, Bernie wanted another shot at running for governor. His friends were adamantly opposed. Richard Sugarman, a philosopher professor who taught existentialism and Jewish thought at the University of Vermont, joined with the others in urging him to give up on fruitless statewide races and instead run in Burlington, a place where he had a chance to win...

Read more in **Managing Chaos: Adventures in Alternative Media**, available July 22, 2024.



Managing Chaos: Adventures in Alternative Media

It is an eye-witness account that explores the unique, tumultuous history of Pacifica radio

and alternative media in America. Filled with episodes from an eclectic career, Greg Guma's new book discusses the evolution of radio and television, the impacts of concentrated media ownership, the rise of the alternative press, his complex relationship with Bernie Sanders, his work in Vermont before and during a progressive revolution that changed the state's power structure, and decades later, what happened while he managed the original listener-supported radio network. Here is another excerpt:

Challenge or Folly?

We rode to Houston Media Source, the city's public access center, on an ancient school bus chartered for the occasion. It was Sunday, October 30, 2005, and the Pacifica National Board was still considering who to choose as the network's next CEO.

During the trip, I struck up a conversation with Ursula Ruedenberg, coordinator of Pacifica's Affiliates Program. Ursula had been active in the "Save Pacifica" movement and afterward took on the tough job of convincing community radio stations that it was all right to rejoin the new and improved network. Curious about my Vermont connections, she fondly recalled her days with Bread and Puppet, the legendary theater group based in the Green Mountains since the 1970s. I had my own memories of those days, weekends camping in Glover, the Domestic Resurrection Circus, and later work with the Schumanns and Robin Lloyd on films and a book, *Bread & Puppet: Stories of Struggle and Faith from Central America*.

Sitting nearby was Sarv Randhawa, a nuclear plant regulator who represented KPFA on the national Board. Sarv was intrigued by my relationship with peace movement icon David Dellinger, a friend who had died just the year before. I had admired Dellinger since the 1960s, and worked with him from the late 1970s onward in Vermont on peace campaigns, *Toward Freedom*, and prison justice. We talked about nonviolence and Dave's ability to overcome differences with love and mutual respect. Pacifica needed that kind of energy to live up to its potential, he believed.

While the Board met in the center's large studio, Georgia and I waited at opposite ends of the labyrinthine building. I caught a glimpse of her, but the headhunters were determined to keep us apart. Struggling to relax, I drew on my training in Buddhist meditation to drop my expectations and simply "be" in the moment. After a while a wiry man entered the waiting room and introduced himself as Steve Brown.

I knew the name from emails that were part of my research. A successful entrepreneur who reportedly made millions through direct marketing, he was — depending on whom you asked — either greatly misunderstood or completely malevolent, a defender of diversity or a racist demagogue, an untapped resource or as dangerous as Karl Rove. Whatever the truth, his ideas were certainly provocative.

That August, for example, he had proposed eliminating most of the national office, including the CFO and other staff, and turning most of its functions over to local business managers or committees. "If we dumped most of the national office tomorrow," he wrote, "what would we give up — other than the need for us to feed it \$6.3 million (he was off by a few million) a year? Getting that money back would make the budgetary woes of all our stations disappear in a flash."

But Brown's real fire was saved for the situation at WBAI, where he served on the local station board, and especially for its Program Director Bernard White and the Justice and

Unity Coalition (JUC), a cadre-style, black-led group with a majority of local board seats and a hard-edged anti-racist agenda. As he saw it, White had “unethically used the station’s resources to consolidate his own power” and bore most of the responsibility for several years of lost listenership and economic decline. And the JUC let him do it, he charged, using underhanded means to maintain control and foist a narrow agenda on the station.

Of course, JUC and White had equally harsh words for Brown, who they described as a racially obsessed liar and purveyor of stereotypes, intent on purging Black programmers and taking WBAI back to the “good old days.” Aware of this, I wondered whether it was safe even to be seen talking with him. But he just wanted to wish me good luck, offer a business card, and volunteer some advice if I got the job. Compared to his emails, the casually dressed 68-year-old seemed mild, almost stuffy.

Ushered into the dimly-lit studio at last, I struggled to remain calm. A serious examination of the organization’s mission was in order, I suggested; after almost 60 years it was about time. I also stressed that Pacifica, one of few independent voices for change in a time of fear and Bush doublespeak, had both a responsibility and an opportunity to challenge mainstream media’s myopia and distortions. But it was letting internal battles and provincial thinking get in the way.

To make a fundamental difference, the network would have to offer the country what founder Lew Hill had imagined for KPFA — dialogue and debate, a celebration of honest differences, not a series of self-righteous monologues that preached more than they persuaded. That was the terrain of self-appointed electronic prophets, right-wing pundits and evangelists who capitalized on mass insecurity to market extreme views and create a distorted reality. Pacifica would have to do better, becoming again a relevant, popular and entertaining voice for political change and social transformation.

Dave Adelson posed the most pointed question. A KPFC delegate and L.A.- based neurophysiologist who had devoted years to Pacifica and been at the center of the “take back” fight, he remained unconvinced. “Well, you’ve essentially said you can drive a car,” he challenged, “but this place is more like a semi truck. How do we know you can drive something like that?”

Whatever their size or shape, organizations are much the same, I replied, and I had led and studied them for more than 30 years. The same can be said of people. Whatever their political differences, they want to be heard, appreciated, and inspired. The leadership challenge would be to listen, resist taking sides in factional disputes, and, at the same time, clarify what makes this a unique organization.

Two more things are worth mentioning. WBAI board member Ray LaForest, a Haitian immigrant and union organizer, asked how long I was willing to remain in the job. Three years was my limit, I announced. If I could accomplish anything useful, it would happen by then or not at all. What I left out was my belief, based on past experiences, that leading a politically-charged organization for much longer can be counter-productive.

Fear about the use of power, especially among progressives, tends to breed suspicion over time and turn support into jaded opposition. In a country where narcissism is a widespread disorder, public figures are often idealized in the early stages. But along with that comes the urge to degrade in the long run, often sparked when the “hero” inevitably disappoints. Intensified by the machinery of mass communication and social media, such a desperate

urge can turn even assassination into a form of spectacle.

Not that I was in danger of being murdered. But judging from Pacifica's recent history, character assassination wasn't out of the question if I overstayed my welcome.

The second point was that even if the job was offered, I wasn't ready to accept it. Before making a decision, I needed to talk personally with members of the staff and Board. What I found out might well influence my decision.

Before the ride back to Bush airport, I heard that the board had voted. But the outcome wouldn't be made public. "Put me out of my misery," I joked. All the headhunters would say was, "Hang in, the vote was close and they're hoping to get closer to consensus. It's not over yet."

That wasn't completely accurate. As I learned later, Eva Georgia had narrowly prevailed. But the decision wouldn't be binding until background checks were conducted.



Back in Vermont, I refocused on Vermont Guardian, the print and online news operation we had launched less than two years before. For my partner Shay Totten, a brilliant reporter and editor who I had known since the late 90s, it was the fulfillment of a dream — a statewide news organization that would reflect "the Vermont Way."

For me, it was a return to editing a Vermont weekly after a quarter century. Before the election of Bernie Sanders and emergence of the Vermont Progressive Party, the Vanguard Press was the Champlain Valley's strongest alternative voice in years, hosting a crew of hungry young journalists, activists and thinkers who shook up the status quo. The Democratic mayor, Gordon Paquette, recognized the threat, and, after the newspaper published an article criticizing his decision to ban rock music in local venues, he decided to counter-attack. Paquette sued the paper and its editors for libel. The case centered on the allegation that he was drunk on the night when he attended a Supertramp concert in Memorial Auditorium and found some concertgoers too rowdy for his taste.

After we published the story, Paquette tried to force a retraction and get the names of our anonymous sources. When we refused he sued, which led to even more bad press. Convinced that the paper - and specifically its senior editor - was out to get him, the goal was to make the price so high that the Vanguard would be forced to back off. We didn't. In early 1981, on the verge of Bernie's first victory, discovery and depositions were still pending.

Shortly after that election the case was quietly dropped.

Throughout Sanders' years as mayor we were sometimes coalition allies, but also opponents at times on development and peace issues. At one point he presided over my arrest (with others) outside an armaments plant.

After four terms, Sanders retired, and prepared for his next chapter, national office. He was defeated by Republican Peter Smith in a 1988 congressional bid, but came back two years later and won. That led to eight terms in Congress — before moving on to the US Senate. He didn't lose another race until his first campaign for president in 2016. Meanwhile, I went on to edit other publications, defend immigrant rights in New Mexico, run a bookstore in Southern California, and launch another newspaper.

In our mission statement for Vermont Guardian, Shay Totten and I noted that although the state had recently “led the way toward social and political progress” — a statement that could be read as a reference to environmental leadership, Town Meeting votes, gay marriage, Howard Dean presidential run, or the rise of Vermont's Progressive Party, Ben and Jerry's and Sanders, to name just a few — its newspapers had largely been gobbled up by large corporations.

Vermont Guardian would “reinvigorate the credo that journalism speaks for the individual, checks abuses of power, and stands vigilant in the protection of democracy and free speech,” we pledged. It would be the state's “editorial town commons, a place where Vermonters can share ideas and forge solutions.”

Despite our bold words and good intentions, however, the business was struggling by the end of 2005. It made me ask: Like the national administration we often criticized, were our grand ambitions really a form of folly? In a post-Thanksgiving editorial, I considered the consequences of ignoring harsh realities.

Those responsible for the Vietnam War insisted on “staying the course” due to a combination of overreaction, illusions of omnipotence, and a shortage of reflective thought. The ingredients that created the Iraq War were much the same — exaggerating “national security” imperatives, assuming that the world's “only remaining Superpower” couldn't possibly lose, and refusing to consider that an invasion could spark global resistance, potentially on a scale that would be impossible to contain.

But describing the Iraq debacle as mere folly was too simple. One addition was incompetence, since those eager to save face later claimed the war began due to a “massive intelligence failure,” pointing to years of so-called evidence that Saddam Hussein's regime posed a serious threat to Iraq's neighbors and the West. But even such semi-critics endorsed the idea that the US should pursue “regime change.” In other words, they had grandly assumed the right to transform a country, to replace its power structure and “democratize” it.

Folly, incompetence, delusions of grandeur? It was hard to choose. In the case of the Bush administration it clearly wasn't just a mistake. It was a conscious decision that looked more like a step toward tyranny.

What was the true history of the Iraq War? The evidence was still coming in. But we already knew that it began long before Congress voted, and before the 9/11 attacks so often used to

justify an open-ended “war on terror.” Were lies told? Certainly. It stood to reason, since many of the war’s architects were admirers of philosopher Leo Strauss, a great believer in the usefulness of lies.

Secrecy and deception, a veritable culture of lies, are necessary, Strauss argued, to protect “the wise” — those with a natural right to rule — from the vulgar masses, who would otherwise be ungovernable and rise up against them. He called such tactics “noble” lies. “Because mankind is intrinsically wicked, he has to be governed,” Strauss wrote. “Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united – and they can only be united against other people.”

And the lessons? Well, people often deceive themselves, overreact to perceived threats, exaggerate, or fail to distinguish between fears, hopes and reality. That is folly, and it is both human and forgivable. But when deception is willful and rationalized as somehow justified or “noble,” perhaps because an enemy must be stopped “by any means,” the line between good and evil has been crossed.

Looking at Pacifica, its warring camps seemed to be letting fear cloud their judgment, or purposely distorting the picture to achieve bitter victories. More to the point, if offered the job, could I overcome such deep-seated animosities and change its culture? Or was I just trading one form of folly for another? No easy answers leapt to mind.

Nevertheless, on December 21, 2005, those became more than academic questions. After almost two months and endless hours of teleconference debate, Pacifica’s national board had reached a decision. It seemed impossible, but the “old white guy” from Vermont was being offered the dream job from hell. The catch was that I had ten days to decide. And two weeks to get to Berkeley.

Only later did I learn how this came to pass, and how frustrating a dream job can be.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share button above. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

Greg Guma is author, historian, and former CEO of Pacifica Radio. He chronicled Vermont history in [The People’s Republic: Vermont and the Sanders Revolution](#) and [Restless Spirits & Popular Movements](#). His recent book, [Prisoners of the Real](#), looks at the costs of expedient answers, authoritarian strategies, and a preoccupation with control and toward liberated groups that offer new opportunities and real choice.

He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Greg Guma](#), Global Research, 2024

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: [Greg Guma](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca