

The Spirit of Tom Paine

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We only know about Tom Paine because Thomas Edison discovered him in the 1920s. Edison believed he was our most important political thinker, and it was essential that his writings and ideas be taught in the nation's schools. It's no exaggeration that there might never have been an American Revolution without this man's writings that had such a profound influence on the nation's founders and masses of people he reached through one of the few "mainstream" means of communicating of that period.

Paine was an unlikely man to have had such influence. He was humbly born and raised in England, was largely self-educated and decided to come to the colonies in 1774 after meeting Benjamin Franklin in London who encouraged and sponsored him to do it. It was a decision that changed the world, but who could have imagined it at the time.

Paine only began writing two years earlier when he took up the cause of excise (or customs) officers arguing in a pamphlet he wrote they were unfairly paid and deserved more. When he came to the colonies he chose the right place settling in Philadelphia where he began writing for the Pennsylvania Magazine, later became its editor and began working on Common Sense in 1776 that he published anonymously. It became an instant best-seller in the colonies and in Europe, made Paine internationally famous and was the most influential piece of writing of the Revolution. It sold as many as 120,000 copies in a population of about four million (equivalent to a runaway 9 million copy best seller today) and convinced many in the colonies to seek independence from the Crown that happened shortly thereafter. He followed up with 16 more pamphlets under the title The Crisis, or American Crisis that were written throughout the war until it ended in April, 1783.

Paine was profoundly and progressively radical - way ahead of his time and what passes for "Western civilization" and mainstream thought today. He opposed slavery, promoted republicanism, abhorred the monarchy, and in many ways was the founder of modern liberalism that Washington and Jefferson called that "liberal experiment, the United States of America." These were the kinds of men who founded the nation - skeptics of the institutions of power that included the "kingly oppressions" of monarchs, the church and the mercantilist corporatism of that time represented by the dominant predatory giant of its day - the British East India Company. Because of the unfair advantage it got from the Crown (a precursor to the kind of outrageous government subsidy and legislative help corporate giants now get), it gained a competitive edge over colonial merchants that led to the famous Boston Tea Party in 1773 that helped spark the Revolution.

Paine had a voice and made it heard in his writings that were disseminated in one of the mass media instruments of that era that consisted largely of pamphlets like his and colonial-era newspapers beginning with the first ever published called the Boston News-Letter debuting in April, 1704 before Paine was born and Ben Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette first

published in 1728 that grew to have the largest circulation of the time and was considered the best newspaper in the colonies. Paine got mass exposure in a way that would be impossible today for his kind of writing – to promote his radically progressive views that would make a neocon cringe enough to see to it those kinds of ideas never saw the light of day in today’s world run by the institutions of power Paine and the founders abhorred.

Think about it. This was a man who was an anti-neocon, anti-militarist, and anti-neoliberal predatory corporatist progressive thinker supporting the rights and needs of ordinary people. He developed a seminal compendium of liberal thinking against those notions of governance in his book *The Rights of Man*. He believed neither governments or corporations should have rights, only people. He thought inherited wealth would be exploited by those having it and would be used to corrupt governments and allow their heirs the ability to create dynasties that would result in a new feudalism. He promoted progressive taxation believing everyone should pay them according to their income. He supported enlightened anti-poverty social programs to provide food and housing assistance for the poor and retirement pensions for the elderly. He felt the best way to build a strong democracy was to provide financial aid to help young families raise their children. He was a strong anti-militarist and wanted all nations to reduce their armaments by 90% to ensure world peace.

He and the founders also wanted the new nation to have a middle class and understood no democracy can survive without one. These enlightened thinkers knew a viable middle class depends on a public that’s educated, secure and well-informed and that the greatest danger to its survival is an empowered economic aristocracy that would polarize society and destroy the very democracy they were trying to create, imperfect as it was.

Imagine if those “radical” ideas were spread in today’s mass media that sees to it the public never hears that kind of thinking. They did in Paine’s day, and it led to a Revolution that freed us from monarchal rule and inspired the founders to create a great democratic experiment in America never tried before in the West outside Athens in ancient Greece that only lasted a few decades. From it we got a Constitution, Bill of Rights and a system of governance Lincoln said “was conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal (in a) government of the people, by the people, (and) for the people.”

That could never happen today with the channels of communication Paine used to electrify and inspire a nation closed off to prevent their use against the kind of oppressive authority Paine opposed. It caused the founders’ great democratic experiment to be lost because people no longer know how much the dominant political class is harming them by serving the interests of wealth and power and getting plenty of it for themselves in the process.

If Paine were here now, he’d lead the struggle against that kind of system the way he did in his day, but he’d get little space in the mainstream to help and would have to settle for smaller audiences available through the alternative ways to reach the public now. The free press of Paine’s day is now open only to the interests of capital who can afford to own one. And those espousing “radical” views like Paine’s are barred from being a part of it.

What the Founders Created, the Dominant Corporate-Controlled Mass Media Thought-Control Police Destroyed

In his seminal work *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy*, Alex Carey wrote “The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the

growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.” Doing it was what 1920s intellectual writer and dean of his day’s journalists Walter Lippmann referred to as the “manufacture of (public) consent” in a democratic system where it can’t be done by force. Manufacturing Consent was the title used by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman for their landmark 1988 book that was dedicated to the memory, spirit and work of Alex Carey. It explained how the dominant major media use a “propaganda model” to program the public mind to go along with whatever agenda serves the interests of wealth and power even when it’s against the welfare of ordinary people which it nearly always is.

Today in the US, the major media are nothing short of a national thought-control police. They’re owned or controlled by dominant large corporations (the kind Noam Chomsky calls “private tyrannies”) grown increasingly concentrated over time and having a stranglehold over the kinds of information reaching the public. It’s given them and the interests they represent the power to destroy the free marketplace of ideas essential to a healthy democracy now on life support in large measure because of how effective they are.

Ben Bagdikian documented their progression in the various editions of his important book, *The Media Monopoly*, most recently updated in 2004 called *The New Media Monopoly*. He showed since 1983, the number of corporations controlling most newspapers, magazines, book publishers, movie studios, and electronic media have shrunk from 50 to five “global-dimension firms, operating with many of the characteristics of a cartel” - Time-Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Viacom and Germany-based Bertelsmann. Maybe it should now be a big six after Comcast Corporation acquired AT&T Broadband in 2001, expanded its cable and other holdings further since, and is now the nation’s largest cable operator reaching over 23 million US households.

These giants have a stranglehold over the dominant medium most people rely on mainly for what passes for news, information and entertainment: the national communication drug of choice - television, that according to Nielson Media Research the average person in the US watches about 4.5 hours daily in the 99% of American households television reaches according to US Census data and the 82% of households with cable or satellite TV access according to government and JD Power and Associates figures.

They don’t get much in return for the time spent even back when innovative early television comedian Ernie Kovacs commented on the quality of offerings in his day. He said he knew why it’s called a medium - “because it’s neither rare nor well done,” and noted media critic George Gerbner harshly criticized the dangers of media concentration in the hands of corporate giants and the adverse effects of its programming. He once said they have “nothing to tell and everything to sell,” and they subordinate their mandate to communicate responsibly to their core function of profit-making.

And reflecting broadly on the corrupting and dumbing-down power of the US corporate media, noted British journalist Robert Fisk once remarked “you really have a problem in this country.” Uruguayan author and historian Eduardo Galeano cites a large part of the problem saying: “I am astonished....by the ignorance of the (US) population, which knows almost nothing about....the world. It’s quite blind and deaf to anything....outside the frontiers of the US.” They know little inside it as well, and of course, that’s the whole idea to maintaining control. Misinform, distract, and control all ideas and thoughts reaching the public - it’s the key to “keeping the rabble in line.” If done well, it works better than all the might of the most powerful nation on earth.

The Ugly Record of “The Newspaper of Record”

Nowhere is the problem of the dominant media more apparent and acute than in what passes for news, information and punditry on broadcast and cable television where the programming presented is poor enough to give pulp fiction a worse name than it already has. But special condemnation is reserved for the so-called “newspaper of record” reporting “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” at least by its standards that are disturbing when understood in the terms of what this publication’s primary mission is – to serve as the lead instrument of state propaganda making it the closest thing we have in the country to an official ministry of information and propaganda.

The “Gray Lady,” as it’s called (“Shady Lady” would be more apt), has been around since it was founded in 1851 as a “conservative” counterpart to Horace Greeley’s liberal New York Tribune by Republican Speaker of the New York State Assembly, Henry J. Raymond and former banker George Jones. It was then taken over by Adolph Ochs in 1896 who became its publisher until Arthur Sulzberger assumed the reigns in 1935. His heirs have maintained it since with Arthur, Jr. now the publisher as well as chairman of the whole company that’s publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange and that over the years became a media empire of nearly two dozen other newspapers, nine local TV stations, a piece of the Boston Red Sox and other enterprises and 2005 revenue of \$3.4 billion – a long way from its humble beginning when its debut simply said: “....we intend to (publish) every morning (except Sundays) for an indefinite number of years to come.”

The NYT is a pillar of the corporate media and a member of the “corporate America” community whose tenets it finds no fault with when they harm the common good, as it nearly always does. Nor is it bothered by its own hypocrisy claiming to be a voice of moderation or liberal thought when, in fact, it’s just the opposite on issues that matter most – like war and peace and the highest crimes of elected officials it ignores, especially when committed by Republicans (once publishing the Pentagon Papers notwithstanding).

The Times plays a crucial role as a loyal servant of empire and its business establishment. No other member of the corporate media has such influence or reach as its message goes out to the world and is picked up throughout it in its highest places. Its front page is what media critic Norman Solomon calls “the most valuable square inches of media real estate in the USA” – more accurately, in the world. Bluntly put, the New York Times has unmatched media clout, and it uses it shamelessly in service to the interests and ideology of its advertisers. It also plays the lead role as an agent of disseminating state propaganda and is able to have it resonate throughout the corporate media, including on television where it counts most, that generally jump on key stories featured on its front pages and in the columns of its leading journalists of which it has many and who show up often in on-air interviews to echo what they write.

The Times also has a bad habit of being disingenuous and allowed to get away with it. While claiming to maintain a firewall between its business and journalism sides and between its news reporting and editorial functions, it does nothing of the sort. In that respect, it’s no different than most all other members of the corporate media club. All professionals who work there march in lock step with the ideology of management with barely any more than a little wiggle room allowed on the major issues affecting business or state policy.

There’s a clear line of authority coming down from the top of the Times hierarchy dictating everything, especially what’s printed on its pages. Any Times writer diverging from this with

the temerity to tell a version of the truth the paper wants suppressed will end up in the Siberia of obit writing or such if they're still even allowed to draw a pay check. There's an unposted sign on the front of the Times building (and throughout the corporate media) all who work there understand and obey - All those entering here give up the right to think and write freely and will henceforth follow management's unwritten and unspoken directives or go find another line of work.

Serving as chief empire-propagandist is an old Times tradition going back decades and best remembered during the prime years of James "Scotty" Reston - its best and most famous journalist who walked easily in the halls of power and was consulted by its denizens. That, of course, is the problem as cavorting with those in power throws any objectivity about them out the window and makes it easy for those having it to get away with almost anything and not have to worry about the dominant media holding them to account.

The Judith Miller saga is a prime example but just the latest incarnation at least up to the time her antics got her in trouble, and she ended up being canned. Judith had lots of predecessors whose names people forget (Claire Sterling being one during the Reagan years), but they served most prominently throughout the cold war years especially when the Times was, and still is, a devout advocate of the home country's notion of "free market" capitalism (of the predatory kind), a flag-waving supporter of its imperial wars of conquest, and a committed enemy of the "evil empire" until it ended and any other country not willing to play by US-imposed rules - Iran under Mossadegh, Guatemala under Arbenz, Cuba under Castro, Chile under Allende, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas and Ortega (now reincarnated), Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, and Bolivia under Morales among others soon to include Ecuador under Rafael Correa when he takes office as the country's populist president in January. The paper also works closely with the CIA going back to when Allen Dulles ran it under Eisenhower with some of its supposedly independent foreign correspondents in the agency's employ or engaged with it.

The Times, of course, played the lead media role in taking the nation to war after the 9/11 tragedy that got Judith Miller sacked once her lying for the state was exposed. For many months leading to the March, 2003 Iraq assault and invasion, the NYT's front pages screamed with daily disingenuous reports about the so-called WMDs "the newspaper of record" knew didn't exist because years earlier it reported the story.

In August, 1995, Hussein Kamel, Saddam's trusted son-in-law and head of Iraq's weapons industries, defected to the West and took with him crates of secret documents on the country's weapons programs including its so-called WMDs that included no nuclear ones. He was debriefed by US intelligence agencies and the UN, told all, and made headlines around the world including on the front pages of the NYT. It all went down the "memory hole" in the run-up to March, 2003 with the false and misleading reporting in the Times led by Judith Miller's reports who was practically deified for her writing that all turned out to be lies.

Now Judith is gone, but her style of reporting remains the way things are done on the NYT's pages, especially the front one. After playing the lead cheerleading role taking the nation to war based on falsely reported threats, the Times is at it again. Back in 2003 and earlier, the primary reason for war was the claim Saddam had developed WMDs and was a threat to use them. The paper then trumpeted top administration (unproved) charges that US intelligence had evidence Saddam stockpiled chemical and biological weapons, was concealing them, and was seeking nuclear ones - all untrue.

Now with the ruse exposed, the Times is trying to rewrite history claiming in September “the possibility that Saddam Hussein might develop ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and pass them to terrorists was the prime reason Mr. Bush gave in 2003 for ordering the invasion of Iraq.” Clear evidence he had them pre-war is now only a “possibility” according to Times-think. This kind of revisionism is standard practice at the NYT and a prime example of the “the newspaper of record’s” disservice to its readers wanting the truth. That’s impossible to get on the pages of the New York Times.

The Times is also a loyal supporter of all things business and the elitist community whose interests nearly always conflict with the public welfare the paper falsely wants its readers to think it supports. It doesn’t, and it shows up on its pages all the time. It was clear from its contempt for working people with its staunch support for NAFTA that’s caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the three countries signed on to it including so many higher paying ones in the US.

Earlier it was late or tepid on major stories like the Savings and Loan scandal in the 1980s caused by excess banking deregulation and concessions to Wall Street, the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) “\$20 billion-plus heist” it pulled off unnoticed until it messed up and got caught, and since March, 2003 its failure to report on the misuse of many billions of taxpayer dollars companies like Halliburton and Bechtel profited hugely from in Iraq and Afghanistan improperly and still do despite Bechtel having gone off to new predatory ventures. And that’s besides the many billions more in the grand theft pulled off by the defense establishment in its collusion with the Pentagon in the business of waging war that’s so profitable for the legions of weapons makers and their suppliers for the blood money they get from it – from us through our misspent or stolen tax dollars.

The Preeminent Newspaper Dedicated to the Interests of Business and Industry - The Wall Street Journal

The Wall Street Journal began publishing in 1889 seven years after its parent Dow Jones & Company was founded in 1882 by Charles Dow, Edward Jones and Charles Bergstresser whose name never became prominent maybe because it wasn’t as catchy as the other two. For many years, the Journal had the largest newspaper circulation in the country until the forgettable USA Today overtook it. What USA Today didn’t overtake was this paper’s influence that reaches virtually all those holding positions of power and prominence in business and government and many beyond. It’s news pages also put out the kind of information its high-powered readers need to know and is usually out in front breaking stories regarding happenings in business and industry providing enough context to explain it well.

It’s quite another story on the Journal’s editorial page where hard right opinion ideology nearly always trumps any attempt to stick to the facts, but it’s red meat for its adherents. The paper states its editorial philosophy up front as favoring “free markets” and “free people” that comes down to supporting all things good for the corporate community and all state policy doing the same, including waging wars of aggression when they’re good for business as they always are as long as they go as planned, and even if they don’t up to the point where policy followed looks to have more of a future profit downside than the bottom line benefits of the moment.

Journal editorial writers also take a particularly belligerent stance against foreign leaders

following an independent course, forgetting “who’s boss,” and being unwilling to serve our interests ahead of those of their own people. Case in point, and any of several stand out prominently – Iran, Syria, North Korea and Venezuela under Hugo Chavez who on December 3 won a landslide reelection victory (greater than any in US history after 1820 when elections here became partisan contests regularly) under a model democratic process lauded by hundreds of independent observers from around the world (including the Carter Center in the US) and shaming the way elections are run in this country that reek with taint and fraud.

But here’s what editorial writer Mary Anastasia O’Grady (whom this writer has clashed with before) had to say about it in her post-election December 8 article titled “The Best Election Money Could Buy,” a clear example of yellow journalism and disinformation dripping with the kind of vitriol and venom O’Grady excels in. She claims “Chavez supporters had more than once shot and killed unarmed civilians with impunity,” but doesn’t mention a shred of evidence to prove it because there is none and it never happened. She speaks of Chavez’s “feared National Guard pour(ing) out of a military vehicle....and armies of informal government enforcers known as chavistas (this writer is proudly one as it means someone supporting Hugo Chavez and his enlightened democratic and social policies)” on another side of a street. She refers to their presence as “lawlessness” ignoring the fact that the military was there in case of disorder, (there was none) and the chavistas were massed on the streets in a post-election joyous celebration unlike anything ever seen in the US. O’Grady likely couldn’t understand the people of Venezuela love their president and went to the streets to show it.

O’Grady continued saying she “never believed Fidel Castro’s ‘mini-me’ would be defeated....even though there is scant evidence that a majority of Venezuelans back his socialist revolution.” Did this woman just arrive from another planet? The independent pre-election polls gave Chavez an insurmountable 30 point edge, and the final results independently judged free, fair and open gave him a smashing nearly two to one victory over his only serious opponent representing the interests of wealth and power the great majority of people in the country rejects that shows a clear endorsement of Chavez’s Revolution.

Nonetheless, O’Grady wasn’t deterred claiming (with no evidence, of course) “a Chavez victory could (only) be had ‘legally’ through a combination of coercion, manipulation and the liberal use of state funds” – again editorial bombast that’s totally unfounded. O’Grady says nothing about opposition candidate Manuel Rosales, chosen in Washington, getting millions of US-funded covert dollar support, something that never would be tolerated here by a foreign government in a US election or a foreign corporation. She cites the “independent electoral watchdog group known as Sumate” for another phony complaint, again failing to disclose this organization was formed in 2002, is funded by the Bush administration to subvert the democratic process in Venezuela, and was involved in the signature collection process in the run-up to the failed recall election in 2004 trying to unseat Hugo Chavez.

The rest of O’Grady’s piece drips with the same kind of agitprop disinformation only a hard right ideologue, like this woman whose background is from Wall Street, would love. The fact that what she writes has no bearing on the truth is of no consequence to her or the other writers on the Journal’s editorial page. Their job isn’t to tell it. It’s to serve the interests of wealth and power, and the only way to do that well is to make sure readers never know how harmful those interests are to the great majority of people everywhere including a fair number of them who read the Wall Street Journal, but for their own sake should stay away

from its editorial page and its shameless servants of empire like O'Grady.

The Tainted Record in Public “Non-Commercial” Spaces

Today in the mainstream there are no safe havens. All major print publications are corporate owned or controlled as are the on-air media including the two main supposed “non-commercial” alternatives established as independent, non-governmental, commercial-free public spaces now as much under the control of the interests of wealth and power as the media giants. Today so-called National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting (PBS) are beholden to the interests of capital because that's where so much of their funding comes from.

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was founded by the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 to provide a programming diversity alternative to the commercial broadcasters, began operating in October, 1970 and was required to follow a “strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature.” At the time, it was stipulated the federal government was prohibited from influencing its programming content, but that was controversial from the start as PBS operated with federal funding making it a target whenever it took on an issue critical of the mouth that was feeding it.

Today corporate donors make up a substantial proportion of PBS funding and with it claim and get the right to decide what programming is run and what it may contain along with Republican allies in the administration and Congress who have plenty to say and put their man, Kenneth Tomlinson, in charge of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to see they got it when George Bush appointed him as chairman of the CPB for a two-year term beginning in September, 2003 after he was earlier appointed to its board by Bill Clinton and confirmed in September, 2000.

This was a clear case of putting the fox in charge of the hen house forcing even the administration-friendly New York Times to report a front-page story in May, 2005 that evidence was mounting that Tomlinson pressured PBS officials to produce more conservative programming and purge shows considered more liberal. It prompted an unnamed senior FCC official to tell the Washington Post the CPB chairman “is engaged in a systematic effort not just to sanitize the truth, but to impose a right wing agenda on PBS....almost like a right wing coup.” In other words, to make sure the ideology in PBS programming was no different than the way the commercial giants see things.

This should have come as no surprise with someone like Tomlinson in charge. He had a conflict of interest based on his prior employment where he was director of US propaganda for Voice of America (VOA) from 1982 - 84, was then appointed to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), served as its chairman and in that capacity oversaw most government propaganda broadcasts to foreign countries including by VOA, Radio Free Europe, the Arab language Alhurra and Radio Marti beamed into Cuba that combined reaches 100 million people worldwide.

He was also ethically tainted at the time according to a State Department inspector general report for having “used his office to run a horse-racing operation and had improperly put a friend on the payroll” and without board approval signed off on \$245,000 of invoices for questionable purposes. He never should have been put on the CPB board or gotten the top job there and now no longer does after being forced to resign in November, 2005 for trying to politicize the agency with his hard line tactics and unethical practices - something that's

become standard practice on Capitol Hill under Republican control.

Sadly, things haven't improved as one Republican ideologue replaced another with the Bush appointment of Cheryl Halpern to be CPB chairperson. And on November 14, 2006, the Tomlinson record was no obstacle preventing George Bush from renominating him as chairman of the BBG for a term to run until August 13, 2007 despite his nomination having been stalled in the Senate because of allegations of misconduct. So far, no charges have been brought against Mr. Tomlinson, and it's doubtful they will be when the 110th Democrat-controlled Congress takes over in January. On Capitol Hill, the climate and culture of corruption is bipartisan, long-standing, and it doesn't take long for the new party in power to engage in the same kinds of unethical practices that drove out the former one. It just takes a while for them to get caught at it.

The situation is no better at National Public Radio (NPR) that long ago abandoned the public trust it was sworn to uphold when it was founded in 1970 as an independent, private, non-profit member organization of public radio stations in the country. It's as tainted and corrupted as its television counterpart and now also gets a substantial proportion of its funding from corporate donors demanding influence, like the kind a \$225 million bequest can buy. That's the amount gotten from the estate of the late Joan Kroc, widow of Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's Corporation that never needs to worry about an unfriendly report on NPR's airwaves no matter how egregious its behavior, and there's plenty of it to reveal that stays suppressed in all the major media including on NPR, the "peoples' radio."

Despite its mandate to be unbiased and serve the public interest, NPR steers clear of that in its one-sided kind of "journalism." It's careful to shy away from all controversial topics that may be sensitive to corporate interests that include those providing it funding support or might wish to like Archer Daniels Midland, Monsanto and Walmart that already do. It's also "respectful" of whichever party is in power with Republican administrations getting special deference as they were from 1994 until the Democrats took control of the Congress in the November, 2006 mid-term elections. Even George Bush's most extreme transgressions can't get NPR's ire up enough to report accurately on them.

That's made even clearer when it's known what kind of man it has in charge - current president and CEO Kevin Klose. Like the CPB during the Tomlinson tenure, so too is NPR run by a man who used to be the director of all major worldwide US government propaganda dissemination broadcast media including VOA, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Worldnet Television and the anti-Castro Radio/TV Marti. And like Tomlinson, it made him an ideal choice for a comparable job at NPR, the "peoples' radio," that like the "peoples' television" and its flagship Lehrer News Hour, never met a US-instigated war it didn't love, support and report endless supportive propaganda about while suppressing all news unfriendly to the US empire and its business interests.

So far as its known, however, Mr. Klose hasn't been accused of the kinds of activities attributed to his former CPB counterpart, staying free from the taint that forced Mr. Tomlinson to resign. That aside, it's had no positive impact on NPR's programming that's just as committed as PBS to serving the interests of wealth and power feeding it while ignoring the public trust despite the considerable funding it gets from that source from frequent on-air fund-raising efforts it has no right or justification asking for.

The Passing of Two Noted War Criminals - A Brief Study in Contrasts

The passing of two noted figures now making daily headlines is one illustration of how corrupted the dominant US media is in their reporting of news and information only exceeded by the crimes of state and predations of corporate giants they conceal and distort because they're one of the serial offenders and must portray the illusion of a free society guaranteeing liberty and justice for all when, in fact, only those of privilege get those rights.

So on December 31 the New York Times reported "Thousands Honor (former president Gerald) Ford (who died on December 26 at age 93 lying in state) Under (the) Capitol Dome." We can read effusive eulogies extolling the common man who "didn't ask to be president....he didn't have an agenda....He was a good man, an honorable man....(and) We owe him a debt of gratitude....He was....a decent man....called on at the right time to serve the country when we needed it most."

Baloney, and so much for illusions. Now a dose of hard reality about a man who rightfully should be condemned and not praised for his time in office and only less than others preceding and following him because his short two and one-half year tenure caused less harm that was still a considerable amount.

In one sense, Gerald Ford was an interregnum president given the job to calm the public's collective ire and angst from years of abuse of the public trust under Richard Nixon including the horrors of aggressive war in Vietnam he allowed to go on and secretly expanded for a time while falsely committing to end it honorably. No war begun dishonorably can ever end with honor, and Gerald Ford never even tried doing it. All he could do was accept defeat and cut and run leaving behind a legacy of Southeast Asia poisoned by illegal toxic chemicals and turned to wasteland with several million dead he never even apologized for. Imperial powers never confess sorrow. It might be taken for a sign of weakness or upset future plans to do it again as Iraqis and Afghans can testify to.

Ford was also falsely portrayed in the media as "Mr. Nice Guy" hiding the fact he was just another privileged white American male elected to Congress, spent a quarter century there and ended up as the nation's first unelected president (although legally, unlike the current incumbent) replacing the man forced to exit the job in disgrace to avoid being thrown out of it in even greater humiliation.

Little or nothing good can be said about Gerald Ford whose assignment was to calm the nation's collective nerves with lots of disingenuous corporate PR and media makeover help. His tenure was marked by a distinct lack of vision or any courage and conviction to move in a new direction and away from a tainted past he was part of that was never acknowledged in the media to conceal his time in the Congress supportive of two major Southeast Asian wars of aggression causing massive death and destruction unreported and all the other crimes of state committed during his years in public office he might have stood against but never did.

Consider further who served under Gerald Ford that explains much about what his administration stood for: his Secretary of State was Henry Kissinger, George HW Bush was CIA Director, Donald Rumsfeld the Secretary of Defense, his White House Chief of Staff was Richard Cheney, and his council of economic advisors chairman was Alan Greenspan in training to move to the banking cartel owned and controlled Federal Reserve where he continued for 18 years betraying the public trust to enrich the financial community he served. With that kind of team surrounding him, what possible good could have come from Ford's tenure. None did, but you'd never know it hearing the kind of undeserved effusive

praise pouring out of the mouths of everyone allowed air time on the major media while suppressing all the negatives deserving condemnation unaided and unspoken in the flow of disingenuous legacy-building of the man, his life and presidency. In the land of media-created illusion, could anyone have expected otherwise.

Gerald Ford revealed was a man who as appointed vice-president let himself fall under the spell of general and future Reagan Secretary of State Alexander Haig who cut him a deal to become president in return for committing the unforgivable act (some rightfully call a crime) of pardoning Richard Nixon saving him from having to be held to account for his crimes in office. He also gave Henry Kissinger authority to allow Indonesia's president Suharto the right to commit genocide against the defenseless people of East Timor killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people only wanting their freedom from imperial aggression and their right to live peacefully in their own land. Earlier he was an important figure as one of the seven Warren Commission members chosen to conceal the real cause of John Kennedy's death in 1963 unrevealed, of course, to this day. Save your praise and tears for this man now departed. He deserves none of either.

Neither does the other fallen leader whose fate was the hangman's rope that may have been warranted but not by the process that got it to his neck or the illegal authority claiming power to put it there to have him hang from it until dead. Few will mourn Saddam Hussein but even despots deserve a better fate, as do all people, but won't ever get it when the law judging them is what the US hegemon says it is - nearly always violating international statutes and norms that was clearly true in how justice was denied Saddam.

But that wasn't the way the Wall Street Journal's January 2 editorial page portrayed it with their lead opinion commentary titled: Justice for a Tyrant. It ended contemptibly claiming "3,000 Americans (gave) their lives in (a) noble mission (ridding) the world of a man who might have killed hundreds of thousands more." The only truth in the editorial was the statement that "Too few of the world's mass killers face such a reckoning," but the Journal writer failed to mention where the worst of the lot are now domiciled.

The fallen Iraqi leader had the misfortune not to have been from that favored home country of the WSJ and thus was subjected to its victor's justice that guarantees none at all to its victims. He was captured and brought to trial by the US occupier's illegally constituted court (giving kangaroos a bad name), called the Supreme Iraqi Criminal (Hanging Court) Tribunal (SICT) that had no authority under international law to conduct the proceeding. The whole process was a funded and scripted in Washington sham with a known guilty as charged verdict in advance, no due process allowed, and a videotaped trip to the gallows disgracefully played out round the world on national television stopping only short of viewing the trap door sprung but leaving little to the imagination.

Not a word was heard in the dominant US media about top Bush administration officials and earlier ones who not only conspired, supported and funded Saddam at his worst, but their crimes overall, then and now, far exceed anything the Iraqi leader was forced to pay for in a disgraceful drawn out public spectacle trial and execution played out for full political advantage amounting to none at all and likely was botched by the stupidity and audaciousness of doing it during the time of the Hajj, or sacred pilgrimage, to Mecca and on Eid al-Adha, or feast of the sacrifice - the holiest day of the Muslim year. In a final irony at this deplorable moment, awaiting his imminent inglorious death amid disgraceful taunts by his hangmen, the world saw an image of this brutish man, reciting verses from the Koran, as the most dignified man at his own execution.

Saddam killed many thousands of his countrymen and women and deserved to be held to full account for them lawfully. But the only law afforded him was that of victor's justice also guaranteeing crimes far greater than his went down the "memory hole" as though they never happened allowing those guilty to be shamelessly lauded as heroes played off in sort of point-counterpoint fashion in the case of the two most recent fallen war criminals neither of whom got the justice they deserved.

Video News Releases (VNRs) - Fake News Masquerading As the Real Thing

VNRs are fake news reports allowing corporate-sponsored pre-packaged propaganda to be aired on television masquerading as real news without the public knowing it's being deceived. They're produced by corporate PR firms for their clients and are widely distributed and accepted by TV stations that get to fill air time without the cost involved to produce their own material. It's a win-win-win situation for VNR producer, the corporations getting free airing of their messages and the media outlets getting free material with the cost saving going right to their bottom line. The only loser is the public getting conned and not knowing it. VNRs also have their ANR (audio news releases) counterpart distributed to radio stations making them part of the scheme to defraud the public as well and pocketing profits from doing it.

Also in on the con is our own government producing its own pre-packaged fake news getting widespread airing on TV and radio to go along with all the media-produced material out in front in their shameless cheerleading for whatever agenda the administration in power is pursuing and needs to lull the public into believing it's for the common good which it never is. The Bush administration has been aggressive in the use of phony "ready-to-serve" news reports at times blanketing the airwaves with them from 20 or more federal agencies selling everything from war by the Department of Defense, supposed "benefits" of big media by the FCC, and the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) by the Interior Department hiding the destructive corporate clear-cutting agenda endorsed by George Bush.

In addition, the Bush White House put journalists on the federal payroll to write positive news stories on a range of issues like portraying the administration as "vigilant" and "compassionate" and promoting government programs like the sham Medicare Part D prescription drug plan that's a consumer rip-off for most seniors and a bonanza for the big drug companies that can charge any price they want under it. Also fraudulently promoted has been the benefits of Bush's No Child Left Behind program for the Department of Education that's one more government-sponsored plan to wreck public education and hand it over to private corporations for profit starting with forcing school districts wanting to qualify for federal funding to use corporate-subsidized and mandated tests that are worthless and harmful to learning as they prevent schools from concentrating on teaching.

Again, it's a win situation for all the parties involved as the federal government promotes its corporate-friendly programs, the industries wanting them get the benefits, the PR firms and journalists "on-the-take" are well-compensated, and the media outlets get free material to fill their time slots. Only the public loses including having to pay to be deceived with our own federal tax dollars and now gets to be subjected to thousands of fake corporate and government-sponsored news reports annually comprising an alarming percentage of what media outlets air pretending the material is real news and information.

The sham persists and grows, and the FCC, in charge of the public airwaves, is part of the scheme as it's doing virtually nothing to stop it although it's mandated to do it under the

Communications Act. In its April, 2005 Public Notice, the agency stated “whenever broadcast stations and cable operators air VNRs, licensees and operators generally must clearly disclose to members of their audiences the nature, source and sponsorship of the material.” It doesn’t happen, the FCC doesn’t step up to do it, and the Bush administration disagrees with its agency’s stated but not followed mandate regarding its own pre-packaged propaganda claiming these VNRs are permissible as long as they’re “informational.” Left unsaid is whether or not the “information” serves the public or some other interest or is fact or fiction. From the well-documented record of the Bush White House, it would take a giant leap of faith to believe whatever it puts out is anything but the latter.

Political Propaganda to Program the Public Mind

Australian-born Alex Carey, cited above, produced innovative work documenting how political and corporate propaganda began and grew more sophisticated through the years. It was first used in the US effectively during WW I and the administration of Woodrow Wilson who was reelected in 1916 on a platform promise of: “He Kept US Out of War.” No less disingenuous than most other politicians, Wilson began planning to enter it in 1917 and did it by establishing the Committee on Public Information under George Creel to orchestrate a public campaign that was able to turn a pacifist nation into raging German-haters resulting in the Congress overwhelmingly declaring war on Germany in April, 1917.

The campaign so impressed the business community it recruited Edward Bernays, who worked with Wilson and was a nephew of Sigmund Freud, to develop its propaganda messages to shape public opinion. Bernays and Ivy Lee pioneered the modern public relations industry and along with political scientist Harold Lasswell and others helped develop the propaganda techniques used so effectively today by government, the corporate media and their PR allies.

They helped develop the ways business and government program the public mind (the ones Walter Lippmann called “the bewildered herd”) by manipulating mainstream journalism and discourse to convince people to support their agenda even at the expense of their own well-being. It’s done the way Lasswell explained saying “More can be won by illusion than by coercion (and) Democracy has proclaimed the dictatorship of (debate), and the technique of dictating is named propaganda.”

Bernays added: “It is impossible to overestimate the importance of engineering consent...(it’s) the very essence of the democratic process.” He explained further in revealing detail the way things are done now by today’s master mind-manipulators: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of the country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized.”

Thought Control by the Corporate Media in A Democracy

Engineering consent is also the essence of its corruption as today giant corporations control our lives, how we’re governed and the information we receive that influences how we think and act. It’s the realization of Lincoln’s fear when he wrote: “I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my

country....corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed." He left out the part about future governments colluding with the country's "money power" making it easier for them to benefit at the public's expense and be able to destroy the republic in the process as Lincoln feared.

Lincoln wrote those words before the collusion began post-Civil war in the first gilded age of the "robber barons" who were pikers compared to the current crop in an era of "globalization" and "the-anything-goes-under-the-administration-of-George Bush." It was long before technology made mass communication possible and the privately-owned media could gain the kind of reach and influence it now enjoys. It was also before the Supreme Court in 1886 gave corporations the right of personhood granting them their long sought after same constitutional rights as people without the responsibilities, enhancing their power greatly, and allowing them to become the dominant institution of our time with the help of the major channels of communication they own, control and use to their advantage.

With them, they control the free flow of information assuring it's compatible with the interests of wealth and power but that ends up being harmful to the public welfare that gets more marginalized as corporate dominance and influence grow. It's left democracy on life support and allowed giant corporations, including the huge media ones, to co-opt government at all levels and do it by keeping the public uninformed on the most vital matters it needs to know about to keep democracy healthy and vibrant. The media gatekeepers make sure that doesn't happen by suppressing all the ugliness it wants concealed, falsely portraying a picture of society in glowing terms and failing to let on its mission is to serve the interests of capital, something these corporate giants are rich in and want a lot more of.

It's long past the time needed to jump-start a process to fight back - to rebuild democracy allowed to wither and is now somewhere between life support and the crematorium. It should start with a national debate on the most pressing issue of our time that must be resolved before anything else can be - real media reform, reclaiming our space and giving the public more control of the airwaves it owns, breaking up the giants, creating more competition and diversity in the commercial spaces, allowing the free flow of information now denied in the mainstream, and creating more open and expanded non-profit/non-commercial alternatives including online where the free interchange of ideas flourishes but is endangered as discussed below. Without all this, no democracy is possible.

It means stanching the corroding effect of a culture of out-of-control commercialism and the glorification of wars against threats that don't exist and waged for conquest and profit. It means reigning in the media giants allowed to go unchecked and helped by friendly legislation that must be halted and reversed. It's up to those on the left and the public en masse to get on this issue - to understand how central it is to all others including war and peace and the health of the state, and to realize how endangered we are by the predations of giant corporations, including the media ones, in league with a rogue government that must be contained to have any chance to save a republic on life support, if that.

The challenge ahead is to halt this assault on the public welfare and sensibility, free society and mainstream journalism from the control of capital and a government serving it, reclaim the public airwaves and mass communication systems and give it back to the citizenry and honest journalists who'll work for all the people and not just those holding the "commanding

heights” of business and government. There’s nothing sacrosanct about the current media structure that’s the result of decades of big media-friendly laws, regulations and huge government subsidies all crafted secretly by the industry without public knowledge, participation or consent and gotten under administrations of both parties. Changing this is a tall order, and one needing a great vision to drive it, especially in the face of the powerful forces working against it in business and government. They’re the enemy, and only mass people-action can and must stop them.

The Battle to Save the Last Frontier of Press Freedom

Today another major threat looms that will move things in the wrong direction if it succeeds. It’s the battle to maintain internet neutrality that’s being debated in Congress, and will resume in the new one in January, as part of several vital pieces of legislation that will decide how it turns out. Included is S 2360, the Internet Nondiscrimination Act of 2006 that prohibits blocking or modifying data in transit other than spam and illegal content. In June, the House rejected HR 5273, the Network Neutrality Act of 2006, that would have denied phone and cable companies the right to price at their discretion to sell favored treatment for content in their spaces at higher rates. It also passed HR 5252, the Communications Opportunity, Promotion, and Enhancement (COPE) Act, that will give these companies the freedom to choose wealthier customers by eliminating the current requirement to serve low income ones as well.

The COPE Act is now in the Senate, and internet neutrality advocates are fighting to defeat it saying its passage will compromise the internet space irrevocably by giving the cable and phone giants a monopoly on high-speed cable internet. This will effectively deny low-income households broadband access and allow these companies the ability to monitor and filter content as they choose. Also under consideration is S 2917, the Internet Freedom Preservation Act of 2006, that amends the Communications, Consumer’s Choice and Broadband Deployment Act of 2006 introducing more rigid net-neutral standards including a ban on the blocking of lawful content and on quality-of-service deals between network and content providers.

The stakes on how all this turns out are enormous to the freedom of the one remaining open public space (along with the few remaining small independent publishers) it’s crucially important to preserve before anything more can be done to reclaim more of what rightfully belongs to us all. Supporters of net neutrality want legislation and regulation mandating digital democracy to keep the internet free from the corrupting influence of corporate control working against the public interest in pursuit of profit. They want it to mandate that phone and cable companies allow internet service providers free access to the public space of their cable and phone lines and to prevent these companies from being able to screen or interrupt internet content consistent with current law. Otherwise, these giants will become self-regulating, able to charge whatever prices they wish and at their discretion block out whatever content they won’t allow in our public space they control for their own private interest.

In the past 10 years, the telecom, broadcast and cable giants have spent a fortune getting legislation passed favorable to its interests and getting back far greater riches and media and telecommunication concentration and control in return. They’ve profited hugely at the public’s expense through massive tax breaks, relaxed ownership rules and unrestricted control of the public airwaves and broadband markets the big five giants plus cable giant Comcast now dominate and exploit with few checks and balances put up against them.

The battle lines are now drawn as public advocates face down the cable and telecom companies to preserve the last media frontier of a free and open internet that's become a symbol and best hope to revive a democratic society, structure and culture now in big trouble. Against us are the corporate media predators who covet what they have no right to have and want to deny the public what's now available to them at reasonable and nondiscriminatory cost. If they prevail, they intend to establish internet toll roads or premium lanes so that users wanting speed and access have to pay extra for it. Those who won't or can't will get slower service and be unable to access some formerly free sites without paying for them. The idea is to give the industry another lucrative revenue stream and do it at the public's expense. It's also another effort to control thought, suppressing altogether what's unfriendly to state and corporate interests and do it in a venue never intended to be exploited for commercial gain or be restricted in its ability to remain free and open.

This is a battle the public can't afford to lose, and the telecom cartel will pull out all the stops to win. It'll be up to the new 110th Congress to decide, and the outcome at this stage is very much up for grabs. The commercial giants have outspent public interest advocates 500 - 1, but concerned citizens fought back flooding the 109th Congress with over one million letters demanding they allow a free and open internet information commons to remain in place. 2007 will likely be the year of decision, and how it turns out will be a crucial marker for potential future media reform and whether there's any chance for a democratic resurgence and national rebirth desperately needed.

In the spirit of Tom Paine, here's what it comes down to:

Step one: save the internet as a free and open space. Keep it out of the hands of corporate media predators wanting to profit from it at our expense and control its content.

Step two: address the greater issue of media reform and change to open the major channels of communications to more competition and public participation.

Step three: achieve steps one and two and then take on the biggest issue of all - saving the republic the way our Forefathers did in creating one that over time we allowed to founder because we lost control of our public media spaces and allowed the forces controlling them to program our minds and thinking to accept what's best for them but against our own self-interest and survival.

It's never too late to act, but it's high time we realized we'd better do it and quickly. Freedoms don't protect themselves and are easily lost the way Edmund Burke explained saying: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Abolitionist Wendell Phillips added "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

It all starts with public awareness through knowledge that's what Thomas Jefferson meant when he said "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free....it expects what never was and never will be....Educate and inform the whole mass of people....They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty....Enlighten the people....and tyranny and oppressions....will vanish like evil spirits....Every generation needs a new (regenerating) revolution."

The revolution we need now begins with regaining control of the means of mass communication to achieve an enlightened public Jefferson spoke of. Achieving that means

all else is possible.

A Dedication In the Spirit of Tom Paine

This essay is dedicated to two web sites reflecting the spirit of the man it honors - Tom Paine's Corner and its Editor Jason Miller who inspired it and Tom Paine.com and its Executive Editor Isaiah Poole. It's also dedicated to Thomas Paine Friends.org and its President Joyce Chumbley who along with others will meet in Orlando, FL on January 29 to celebrate the birthday of this noted man.

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