

Tilting right

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

Last September over 700 hundred people were arrested in the largest civil disobedience in New Haven, Connecticut, that anyone could remember. Those arrested were standing up for a new social contract between the city of New Haven and Yale University, as well as improved wages and pensions for Yale workers and the right to organize new unions. In a small city like New Haven, 700 people shutting down the city at rush hour to get arrested, with 2,000 silent witnesses lining the streets, would seem like front-page news. It certainly garnered attention in the *New York Times* and on National Public Radio. But the *New Haven Register* covered the massive civil disobedience on page three.

What pressing local issue took priority in the minds of the editors and ended up on the front page that morning? An allegedly racy art exhibit in one of Connecticut's wealthy shoreline suburbs.

Eric Alterman, media critic for the *Nation*, argues that the media, after decades of fending off the criticism that they are too liberal, have moved defensively to the right. Using the sports analogy of "working the refs," Alterman suggests that after decades of being pilloried by neoconservative think tanks, the media have become so sensitive that their calls now tend to go in favor of the right, where the coaches have been loudest and angriest in their accusations. The liberals, Alterman notes, feel obligated to choose complexity over simplicity. Because they have trouble agreeing on just what insult to hurl back at the refs, they have been left on the sidelines watching the bad calls and debating their meaning.

The notion that the media were a bunch of liberal frothy skim milk cappuccino drinkers gained steam mostly through the concerted attacks of a conservative punditocracy. Alterman is fighting back. He offers some history and perspective on those who have promulgated the notion of a liberal media. He describes, for example, the work of pundit Ann Coulter, who referred to Bill Clinton as a "pervert, liar and felon," and to Hillary Clinton as "pond scum" and "white trash. " Coulter responded to anti-American demonstrations in Arab countries after 9/11 by

suggesting that we "invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity." Despite her claim that the media are biased to the left, she and others like her appear frequently on mainstream television and in print.

Alterman is also responding to Bernard Goldberg, whose best-selling book about the media, *Bias*, makes claims such as "Everybody to the right of Lenin is a 'right-winger' as far as the media elites are concerned." *Bias*, Alterman points out, received enormous publicity from the very media the book identifies as likely to be hostile to it. Alterman offers a convincing account of the dominating presence of conservatives in the media, from popular Christian programming, to talk radio, to the television networks, to the self-described "wild men" of the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board, who "are so deeply committed to the far-right propaganda they espouse, they frequently contradict the reporting in their own newspaper."

Perhaps most surprising is his argument that the few examples of liberal media are not so liberal after all. In an instructive lesson in journalism history, he documents the profound shift to the right of magazines like the *New Republic*--something the so-called liberal media have failed to notice. When they quote conservative authors now appearing in that magazine, the pundits use phrases like "even the liberal *New Republic* states . . ." implying that the neoconservative opinion is coming from the left. In reality, the whole field has shifted to the right, so that what was once neoconservative now gets played as liberal. A genuinely liberal point of view is missing.

Alterman argues that the shift represents not America in general but rather a neoconservative elite who systematically "worked the refs" through groups like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. Using groups dressed up like think tanks to promote the myth of the liberal media, they also have launched books that promote their ideology with a savvy that the left has yet to match.

Alterman documents the writing and promotion of Charles Murray's bestseller, *The Bell Curve*, a book despised by academics but lavishly promoted by conservatives. *The Bell Curve*, most famous for its claims about black genetic inferiority, was heavily reviewed throughout the defensive but so-called liberal media and thus, Alterman argues, received much more attention than it deserved.

"*The Bell Curve* undoubtedly opened the door for another American Enterprise Institute sponsored assault on the conventions of race relations and politely

speaking racism. That book was Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism*," Alterman explains, and then goes on to tell the story of how Glenn Loury, a black neoconservative scholar, resigned his affiliation with AEI over its sponsorship of D'Souza, whom Loury described as "as a thirty-something journalist with no formal research training and a well-deserved reputation as a polemicist" and whose work was "merely this year's entry in the black inferiority publishing sweepstakes."

In the end, Alterman argues, defensive media afraid of being called liberal have given positive attention to ideas that in the past would have been called racist. The entire public debate about poverty and race has shifted to the right.

Alterman also considers the media response to 9/11, after which American flags started appearing on news anchors' lapels and TV station logos. The clamp-down on dissent was intensified.

Readers may recall Jerry Falwell's extraordinary remarks on the *700 Club* after the terrorist attack, when he observed to a grieving nation, "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. . . . I believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way--all of them trying to secularize America--I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'" Host Pat Robertson seconded those remarks. Nevertheless, as Alterman notes, when George Bush made his long-awaited speech outlining Middle East policy in the spring of 2002, Robertson was the very first "expert" CNN turned to for post-speech commentary.

Suddenly, after 9/11, the so-called liberal media were castigating all critics of government, from Jesse Jackson to Alice Walker, to the National Endowment for the Arts, described by George Will as a "national menace" and "as frightening in its way, as any foreign threat." The *New Republic* (of "even the liberal *New Republic*" fame) created an "Idiocy Award" for those who made antiwar or anti-American comments. "The combination of these cops on the beat has the effect of silencing those with even the mildest of unpopular opinions," comments Alterman.

What Liberal Media? will probably not change the minds of fans of right-wing talk radio or the *Drudge Report*. It reads like a rant, but it's a witty and entertaining rant from one who loves his field and has done his research. And in the short last chapter, readers will sense the beating heart of an idealistic journalist who would rather help his profession improve than participate in a race to the bottom. In a

media world of diet tips, celebrity gossip and lottery winners, Alterman reminds us of the value of the buried and important stories about real people. Hard-hitting journalism from a wider political spectrum than we currently have will ultimately strengthen us as a people.