

The red and the blue: Revealing information

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

Columnists have the luxury of saying what mainstream media often ignore or brush aside. Within journalistic limits of fairness, accuracy and good taste, the columnist gets to stop and stare at the underside of news reports, which explains why columnists are especially valuable in a polarized political environment.

Red State voters have George Will, Cal Thomas, Bill Safire or David Brooks to explain the definition of torture or justify the White House use of God talk. Blue Staters have Molly Ivins, Maureen Dowd, E. J. Dionne and Tom Oliphant to point out outrageous inconsistencies in the current conservative rhetoric. (Newcomers to this column might conclude that there is a bias in this description, and they would be right.)

These ruminations on columnists come to mind as we go through yet another “grand moment” in Iraq’s “move toward democracy,” an election conducted under severely restricted conditions of a military occupation, a moment that joins the long list of Iraqi “successes” like the fall of the Saddam statue, the capture of Saddam and the transfer of power last summer from U.S. forces to Iyad Allawi, a longtime CIA employee.

The purpose of this particular column, however, is not to focus on the Iraqi election, but to point to some of the writers whose work I have found valuable on the Blue side of the political/cultural debate. Think of it as balm for the defeated, or—if you won in November—accept it as compassion for the vanquished.

Read Red columnists to understand how Bush backers so easily adjust to the president’s shifting explanations for invading Iraq. Red columnists also help us understand what the Bush White House means when it says that 40 years from now our Social Security system will collapse unless the government takes advantage of the public’s desire to gamble with funds intended as a security guarantee for the elderly.

Since news is “made” by officials in power, Red columnists will have an easier time of it for at least the next four years, as interpretations from official sources are automatically given credence by the public. All the more reason why Blue columnists like Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* play such an important role in the political and cultural wars. Without Dowd, the public might have missed an important part of the Armstrong Williams story.

Williams is the conservative columnist who now admits he made a “mistake” in not disclosing the fact that he was paid nearly a quarter of a million dollars by President Bush’s Education Department to say nice things about the administration’s “No Child Left Behind” program. President Bush later denounced the practice of hiring journalists to push government programs in their “independent” columns.

Williams is not a stranger to the Bush family, nor is he new to the Republican attack teams. Before shifting to column writing, he served as personal assistant to Clarence Thomas at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

During contentious Senate hearings for Thomas’s nomination as a Supreme Court justice, Anita Hill testified that Thomas had sexually harassed her when she was on staff at the EEOC. To counter his fellow African-American colleague during the hearings, says Maureen Dowd, Williams “gleefully attacked Professor Hill, saying, ‘Sister has emotional problems.’” He told the *Wall Street Journal* that “there is a thin line between her sanity and insanity.” If that background report on Williams appeared in any news reports, I failed to see it.

Then there is Houston-based columnist Molly Ivins, who takes delight in providing background on Texas-based politicians, as she did recently in commenting on Jonathan L. Snare’s appointment by the Bush administration to head the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Ivins reports that Snare is an expert in neither health nor safety, “but he used to be the lobbyist for Metabolife, the ephedra diet pill that attracted so much unpleasant attention. Ephedrine was finally barred in 2003 after the Food and Drug Administration decided it had caused 155 deaths.” According to the *Washington Post*, “Metabolife spent more than \$4 million lobbying the Texas Legislature between 1998 and 2000. . . . Snare was also general counsel to the Republican Party of Texas from 1999 to 2001 and has extensive experience in election law.”

Unqualified media and public support for Israel prevails among both Red and Blue columnists, so for a look below the surface, read liberal Jewish columnists like Ori Nir, who writes for the U.S. publication *Forward*. In a column on rumbles of discontent within the American-Jewish community over Israeli policy, Nir reports that some 50 senior executives from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations received pre-trip instructions for their annual mission to Israel from Conference executive vice-chairman Malcolm Hoenlein: "It's important to send a message [to the Israeli public] of support for the democratically elected government of Israel and also to the American public, especially on issues of security and defense." Hoenlein also expects the conference to "articulate a similar public message when it returns to America."

Don't expect such revealing information in mainstream news reports.