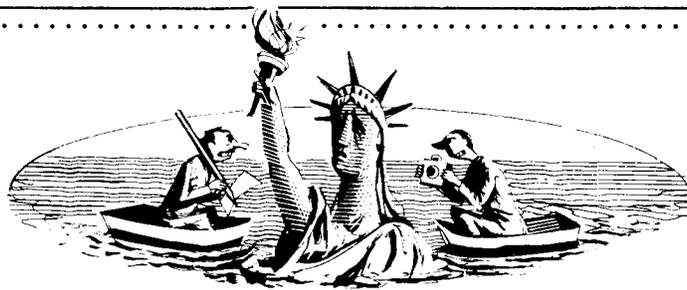


PRESSWATCH



WOODWARD DISINFORMS

by Michael Ledeen

Analyzing the “disinformation” story—launched by that master of the subject, Bob Woodward, in the *Washington Post* on October 2—is a daunting undertaking. By now, the basic premise of Woodward’s article (often commented upon, rarely read) has been widely accepted: as the subhead put it, “Elaborate Campaign Included Disinformation That Appeared as Fact in American Media” (that’s all eight columns on the top of the first page, folks). The “American Media” referred to by Woodward was primarily the *Wall Street Journal*, which had run a front-page story by James Walcott and Gerald Seib on August 25, alleging that Libya and the United States were on a “collision course,” since the U.S. had discovered that Qaddafi was preparing new acts of terrorism. In Woodward’s view, citing a secret White House memorandum and the usual collection of unidentified sources, that story was false in all major details. And the media screamed bloody murder:

- “We should leave that garbage to the Russians” (A.M. Rosenthal, executive editor of the *New York Times*).

- “It appears that there are some people [in the White House] who think we have to emulate the Soviet Union in order to compete with them” (Senator William Cohen).

- “Americans grow up convinced that their values are different and more enlightened, but when ‘disinformation’ ceases to be merely a Russian word, the distinctions begin to blur, and a deeply disturbing impression is conveyed to the rest of the world” (Jonathan Alter et al., *Newsweek*).

- “This administration has contempt for the press, from the top right on down” (Jack Nelson, *Los Angeles Times*).

- “The government actually conveyed to reporters things it knew to be false—that opposition to Col. Qaddafi

Michael Ledeen is senior fellow in international affairs at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies.

was stirring and that an American attack was on the way” (*Washington Post*).

Indeed, the conviction that the American media had been deliberately misled was so firmly entrenched that just one week later the *New York Times* editorialists (Max Frankel’s last editorial comment?) wrote: “It may cross the reader’s mind that Americans are learning more of the truth from Managua than Washington while their Government, as in the recently debated case of Libya, engages in disinformation . . .” With such near-unanimity, you might think that the only thing left to discuss is the degree of malfeasance on the part of American government officials, but things are actually quite different; unless I am sadly mistaken, the American public has in fact been the victim of a hoax perpetrated by Mr. Woodward.

Woodward’s original claims (which, as we shall see, he drastically modified in a later article) were basically three in number:

1. That false information was planted in American news media,

claiming that the United States government had learned that Libya was preparing new acts of terrorism (Woodward claimed that “U.S. intelligence officials had actually concluded in August that Qaddafi was ‘quiescent’ on the terrorist front”).

2. That indeed, most likely as a result of the American “disinformation” campaign, Libya began planning new terrorist acts in September.

3. That false information was provided to the American press, claiming that the Administration was planning “a new and larger bombing of Libya in case the President orders it.” Woodward claimed that in fact “the administration only had contingency plans for new military action that were several months old, and nothing new was being done.”

Every one of Woodward’s claims is false. There was indeed information showing that Qaddafi was preparing new acts of terrorism, and while there are always people in the American government who challenge any given interpretation of the basic data, most of the senior officials who work on this subject agreed that there was every good reason for serious concern.



Worse still, in an attempt to buttress his case against the government, Woodward tore a crucial phrase totally out of context. While he wrote, early in the story, that Qaddafi was judged to be “quiescent,” the actual phrase in the White House document gives a quite different impression: “Although the current intelligence community assessment is that Qaddafi is temporarily quiescent in his support of terrorism, he may soon move to a more active role.” For those who know how to read, that means that the information showed that Qaddafi was about to *abandon* his “temporary quiescence.” Thus the concern. To read it otherwise is to accuse Admiral John Poindexter of misleading, not the American media, but his boss Ronald Reagan.

This means that claim no. 2 is also false; indeed, it is the most vicious piece of disinformation in the entire article, for it suggests that the *real* cause of Qaddafi’s resumption of terrorism in September was the United States. As usual, we have the unnamed “source who considered the August initiatives potentially dangerous” who provided Woodward with the perfect quotable quote: “There’s a fine line between harassment and provocation.”

Those readers who have been with me for the past few months will recognize this as part of a pattern. Month after month, a variety of *Post* correspondents has striven mightily to imply, infer, and otherwise convey the impression that Qaddafi is not a serious threat, that any American action against Libya will only provoke Qaddafi to even greater excesses, and that Reagan’s refusal to seek *rapprochement* with Libya is at least as much a cause of Libyan-sponsored terrorism as is Qaddafi’s own passion. Woodward has been one of the major sponsors of this world-view, which he has advanced largely through the use of leaked, top-secret documents dealing with covert American programs aimed at Libya. So the theme that “America provoked Libya” is not new for Woodward.

That leaves us with claim no. 3, and Woodward is wrong again. For there

were a variety of options and plans being studied throughout the American government in August and September, not just the old programs. And I don't know anyone close to the President who believes anything other than what the *Journal* said: if the Libyans had been caught engaged in further acts of terrorism against American targets, the American response would have been more vigorous than it had been last April.

So the *Wall Street Journal* story was correct in all basic details. If the authors erred, it was in dramatizing the degree to which the American government was committed to a single course of action (the "collision course"). It would have been more accurate to have said that if Qaddafi carried out the acts he seemed to be contemplating, there would be a "collision."

What, then, remains of the claim of disinformation? Precious little, as Woodward himself acknowledged in his next effort, on October 6. After describing yet another classified document (this time from the State Department), Woodward wandered all around the subject, and finally described the *actual policy adopted vis-à-vis Libya*: "... the only deception was to be directed abroad and at Qaddafi." In other words, contrary to all the headlines, the *Post's* own editorials, the explosions of righteous indignation from the media community, and even the bizarre resignation of State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb, the chief inquisitor himself granted that there was no disinformation aimed at the American media. Woodward was left quoting yet another unnamed official to the effect that the *Journal* had been misled by a "Lone Ranger operation."

This is a far cry from the original claims, and even *it* is wrong, since the *Journal* wasn't misled. It wasn't even mistaken. But no one felt like pointing out Woodward's retraction; the media pack had been unleashed against the Administration, and its blood lust was not about to be turned off. Meanwhile, the Administration's reaction was not clear at all: while the President correctly denied any deception of American reporters, the Secretary of State on occasion seemed to confirm the claim: "I know of no decision to have people go out and tell lies to the media. I think, however, that if there are ways in which we can make Qaddafi nervous, why shouldn't we?"

Fair enough, but George Shultz should have been a lot tougher with those who were screaming "disinformation." The apparent divergence between his words and those of the President hurt the Administration and en-

couraged journalists to continue their assault.

What does it all mean? There were several forces at work, least of which was the profound jealousy between the *Post* and the *Journal*. It was common knowledge in Washington that *Post* editors were enraged at being scooped by the *Journal*, and the Woodward story was clearly aimed in part against his competitors at the other newspaper. But the basic passion was the one we've seen before: the desire to shape American foreign policy. The Woodward stories, like those in the past, put the burden for the conflict with Libya on Reagan's shoulders, rather than on Qaddafi's back. If that isn't the real disinformation, what is it?

There is also a problem with scriptural exegesis of official documents. Like many people with little understanding of how government works, Woodward takes internal memoranda as sacred text, providing an absolutely reliable picture of "real policy." There are dozens of reasons for writing a memorandum in the government, and many of these have very little to do with the actual content of American policy. The State Department memo cited by Woodward in his second article, for instance, is a clear example of what I like to call the "pre-emptive policy" memorandum. In essence it says, "do nothing, the situation will take care of itself." For the only "action" recommended by the men and women of the State Department is trying to convince Qaddafi that there are Libyans who don't like him, and that there are signs that even the Russians are thinking of getting rid of him. No "disinformation" is needed in this case, since both statements are true, and Qaddafi knows it—indeed he's known it for quite a long time.

Finally, we are left with the ongoing problem of the *Post's* passion for the publication of government secrets (and once the media learned that the Administration was trying to find the source of the leaked documents, they condemned it with their usual violence). One can debate the ethics of this question interminably, but the basic fact remains this: No government can effectively design and conduct foreign policy if its private discussions and plans appear in the press. Part of this is because secrecy is sometimes indispensable to the success of policy, and part of it is for a very different reason: if people come to learn that their most private views are going to be published, they will no longer speak their minds. The result of *that* situation is that errors will not be caught at an early stage, and people, instead of

saying stupid things, will do them instead.

One of the most interesting footnotes to the Great Disinformation Scandal of 1986 is that the great bulk of letters to the editor at the *Post* were hostile to Woodward. *Post* "ombudsman" Joseph Laitin spoke of "the reader outrage over the *Post's* publishing Bob Woodward's revelation

last week." Laitin was shocked, because he thought that "it is odd that the vehement reaction was to the *Post's* printing things that were true." They weren't, but the readers couldn't have been expected to know that. The readers were upset at seeing yet another case where government secrets were on the front page of the *Post*. They were right. □

More people died in Stalin's "terror-famine" of the 1930s than in World War I — in all countries combined. How is it possible that this major event, involving millions of deaths, is only now making news, nearly half a century after it happened? This book tells the full story, revealing how communist ideology provided the motivation for an unprecedented massacre of men, women, and children in the Ukraine.

"Indispensable reading for anyone who wants to understand the shaping — and misshaping — of the modern world." — *New York Times*

"A chilling account of Stalin's regime cold bloodedly killing 20 million of its own subjects." — *Washington Post*

"A carefully researched and superbly written study... We can be grateful that [a] poet and distinguished Russian scholar has done the job well." — *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

HARVEST OF SORROW

SOVIET COLLECTIVIZATION AND THE TERROR-FAMINE

ROBERT CONQUEST

"A powerful and disturbing book... essential reading for those who wish to understand the nature of the Soviet system... It is likely to become a classic." — *Wall Street Journal*

\$19.95 at better bookstores or direct from Oxford University Press, Department HS, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

...reads like a top secret briefing from an intelligence agency or perhaps a fact sheet lifted by a mole and discovered by John Le Carré's George Smiley." — *The New York Times*

THE MASTER TERRORIST

The True Story Behind Abu Nidal

by YOSSIE MELMAN

"The first detailed and accurate account of the leading state-sponsored terrorist gang..."

Walter Laqueur

"Thorough research and a severely dispassionate analysis of concrete evidence mark this detailed history of covert warfare waged by Abu Nidal, a chillingly murderous Palestinian terrorist. Here is a book that skillfully dissects the pathology of anti-Israeli and anti-American violence in the Mediterranean and Mideast."

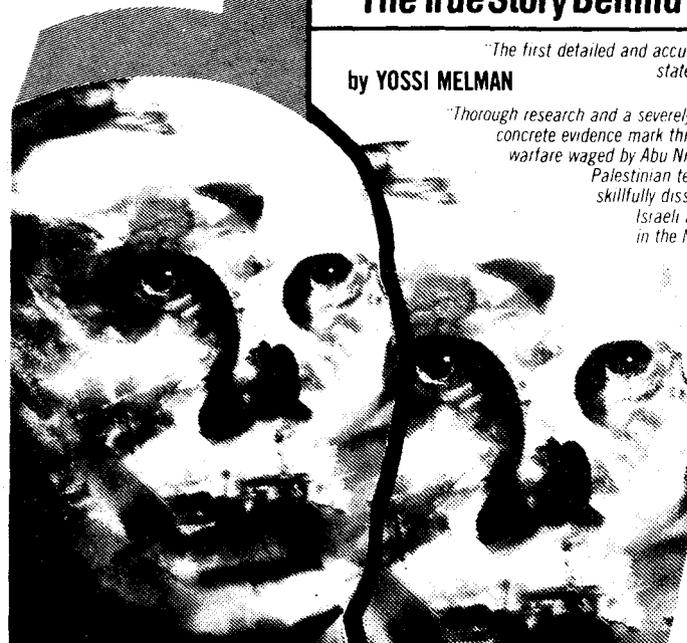
Dr. Ray S. Clune
former Deputy Director of CIA
Department of Terrorism

ISBN 0-915361-52-3

ADAMA BOOKS
306 West 38th Street
New York, New York 10018

Books distributed by Franklin Watts

Illustration by Mirshah Ansari



THE TALKIES



WEIRDOS

by Bruce Bawer

When I look back now, it seems to me that I spent countless hours at college in the mid-seventies sitting in a dormitory room and listening to my friends extol the virtues of a movie called *Eraserhead*. Written and directed by one David Lynch, it seemed always to be playing somewhere on campus. "It's so weird," my friends would tell me—*weird*, naturally, being a term of exalted, unqualified praise—"and it's even weirder when you're high." Alas, as one who wasn't interested either in "weird" or in getting high, I never did go to see *Eraserhead*. Nor did I catch Lynch's subsequent films, *Dune* and *The Elephant Man*. (Lynch served only as director on these films; the scripts were the work of other, apparently far less weird, individuals.) So it is that I came to Lynch's new film, *Blue Velvet*, which he both wrote and directed, knowing nothing about this notorious filmmaker except what I had heard.

As far as *Blue Velvet* is concerned, of course, what I had heard—and what most of North America has also doubtless heard by now—is that the film is not only weird but extremely disturbing. It is certainly not a movie for children and—what with the obscenity, the profanity, and the graphic rape, violence, sadomasochism, and mutilation—it may not be a movie for many adults, either. What makes it so disturbing to this viewer, however, is not so much any of these things in and of themselves—which are, in any event, less shocking than the reviews and the scuttlebutt would lead one to expect—as the fact that Lynch manages, in this film, to communicate quite powerfully a moral vision that is utterly despicable.

The film is set in the real-life town of Lumberton, North Carolina, but from the beginning it doesn't feel quite like Lumberton, North Carolina (or, for that matter, like Wilmington, North

Carolina, where the picture was actually shot). The major characters' accents are wrong, and the atmosphere is wrong too: Lumberton, as Lynch renders it, feels more like a medium-sized Midwestern city than a small Southern burg. The film is supposedly set in the 1980s, but it feels and looks and sounds more like the fifties; the only significant contemporary touch—and significant it unquestionably is, considering that the plot revolves around a severed human ear—is the hero's earring. Everything is just a bit off—and creepily, insidiously so, in a manner reminiscent of the ominous, synthetic American-home-town-on-Mars in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*.

In the film's opening sequence, Lynch presents Lumberton as a caricature of pure, wholesome, hardworking small-town America. He makes a running surrealistic joke out of the town's name: the call letters of the radio station are W-O-O-D, and lumber trucks keep roaring past in the background while the radio announcer delivers a cheery, hi-ho-hi-ho-it's-off-to-a-day-of-tree-chopping-we-go aubade. This town, clearly, is meant to be perceived as America in microcosm, a place from which, day after day, the Children of Light religiously set forth to tame the dark wilderness. The film's hero, a high-school boy named Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), lives with his folks in a nice white frame house with a big green lawn and a garden containing big red and yellow flowers under a solid blue sky. This world of primary colors is photographed in bright, even, and shadowless light, with the objects very sharply defined, and the result is that the well-tended flowers and grass are not beautiful but laughable, grotesque, even a bit chilling, as if to indicate that the sort of wholesome, innocent life suggested by this Disneyish setting is nothing but a banal lie, an impossibility; indeed, the perfectly real flowers and grass look positively phony, like the illustrations in a Dick and Jane book.

Significantly, it is not on that excellently maintained, sunshiny lawn but in the shady wild grass outside of Lumberton that Jeffrey—whose father has just suffered a heart attack while watering the lawn—finds a severed human ear. While he holds it in his hand, the camera closes in on it, as if to enter through it (as through a black hole) an alternate universe: and alas, after Jeffrey delivers the ear to a police detective (George Dickerson), it's as if he has entered another world, as if *Mary Poppins* had suddenly given way to *Un chier andalu*. He discovers, from the cop's blonde daughter, Sandy (Laura Dern), that a singer named Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), who sings "Blue Velvet" in a local night spot, is somehow implicated in the case. With Sandy's help, Jeffrey does a little snooping, and finds himself drawn to—and, before long, inextricably involved in—Dorothy's smarmy world. That world, which is symbolized by Dorothy's gloomy brown apartment, is the antithesis of his own; it is as starkly real (though the only sign of nature in Dorothy's flat is a phallically long-stemmed potted plant) as the grounds of Jeffrey's home are fake-looking. Likewise, Dorothy herself, a woman of strong earthy passions, is the opposite of the other young woman in Jeffrey's life, the vapid, antiseptic Sandy. (Incidentally, Dorothy's accent is vaguely European, which seems to suggest that Lynch intends for the two young women to represent a contrast between European experience and American innocence.)

Jeffrey learns that Dorothy is being forced to have sex with a repulsive vulgarian named Frank (Dennis Hopper), who has kidnapped her husband and child. (The ear, apparently, was the husband's.) Taking Dorothy violently on her living room floor, Frank calls her "Mommy" and forces her to call him "Daddy"; he hurts her and she, for her part, manifestly wants to be hurt. Jeffrey, in watching this sadomasochistic encounter from a nearby closet, is effectively witnessing a sort of post-adolescent primal scene; he's an

infant all over again, a babe being introduced to a whole new level of sexual awareness. What's most disturbing of all, though, about Frank is that, compared to Jeffrey's unbelievably nice-nice world, this sadistic sicko and his grubby team of conspirators have, for the viewer, an uncomfortable *realness* about them—and it is only a small step from realness to naturalness, from naturalness to rightness. Dorothy, at one point in the film, says, "I know the difference between right and wrong," but the whole purpose of *Blue Velvet* is to confound our sense of right and wrong, to suggest that such distinctions are simpleminded, that what's thought of as "right" can be inhumanly dull and spiritless, and that what's "wrong" can be passionate, vibrant with life. In the logic of this film, indeed, love and evil, passion and violence are essentially one; to feel deeply is to hurt (and to be hurt) deeply; to love is to be obsessed as Frank is obsessed (and as Jeffrey comes to be obsessed) with Dorothy. "You're just like me," Frank tells Jeffrey, and Lynch's implication plainly is that, under the skin, anybody with a capacity for deep emotion is just like Frank; only the bland and affectless, like Sandy—to whom love is a superficial, cheerleaderish entity, lightly bestowed, easily transferred, and powerless to inflict deep or lasting pain—can truly lead productive, orderly, and responsible lives.

Sometimes—for example, when Frank drags Jeffrey, at gunpoint, to a cheap dive where a bizarre little man lip-synchs a pop tune and three fat, garish women stand around watching—the film seems to descend into a broadly campy mode suggestive of John Waters; one has the feeling, at such moments, that Lynch takes nothing seriously, that he is just playing with clichés of black comedy and surrealism and experimenting with pseudo-Felliniesque notions of casting. But on the whole the film succeeds at what it wants to do—which is to say that it is repulsive on a profound level. The conclusion, moreover, is dis-

Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator's movie reviewer and author of *The Middle Generation, a study of four twentieth-century American poets* (Archon Books).