

by John Corry



# Fancy Man Fever

**T**he polls now show that Bill Clinton is up, while the congressional Republicans are down. Meanwhile, the voters are supposed to be in a funk, bereft of hope in the absence of Colin Powell, and eager to embrace none of the above. One way or another, things do look grim, and while it is no good blaming all this on the media, their behavior of late has been more mischievous than usual. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial noted that when Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan made some “ambivalent remarks” about Bill Clinton’s tax plan in 1993, they received “huge publicity as a pure endorsement of the entire Clinton budget.” On the other hand, when Greenspan gave what the *Journal* called a “thundering endorsement” to Republican budget proposals in a speech in November, the speech was not reported.

None may dare call that liberal bias, of course, so give the press an allowance, and say it was only distracted. Greenspan spoke five days before the recent elections. The governorships of Kentucky and Mississippi were at stake, as well as seats in assorted state legislatures, and presumably the results would suggest which way the country was going. The same day that Greenspan spoke, the *New York Times* wistfully reported on page one that Democrat Dick Molpus was in “striking distance” of Republican Gov. Kirk Fordice in Mississippi. Molpus, it seems, was forging a coalition between black voters and white women, and whatever his appeal to blacks, it was obvious why he was attracting the women. The *Times* said

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they rejected Fordice’s “bombastic brand of Mississippi machismo.”

The Kentucky election, however, was hardly worth the notice. As the *Times* reported on page 12, Kentucky voters were apathetic. Neither Republican Larry Forgy nor Lt. Gov. Paul Patton had “generated much excitement.” Democrat Patton, though, was hedging his bets. In his final television debate with Forgy, he asked voters to support “our conservative agenda for the citizens of Kentucky.”

Now Fordice won handsomely, of course, and as appalling as it must have seemed to the *Times*, the machismo probably worked in his favor. Forgy lost, although he got 49 percent of the vote in a state where neither of the last two Republican gubernatorial candidates had gotten more than 35 percent. Meanwhile Patton, despite having invoked “our conservative agenda,” appeared all over television saying Kentucky had said no to Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich. But surely Kentucky had not done that, and since the Republicans also came within one seat of winning the Virginia senate, even though they have never controlled a Southern legislature in this century, it would seem they did well in the elections.

**N**onetheless, the headline in the *Times* the next day said: “Republican Drive Fails to Advance Around Country.” This was not quite true, but the *Times* finds the conservative resurgence distasteful, and it looks for comfort where it can. It also defends a decaying political system with whatever weapons it can muster. The old order it represented is passing away, and the liberal fancy men who write for the paper’s editorial and op-ed pages have hysteria in their voices. James Reston may have been dull,

but he was never nasty; and even when he was wrong, at least he appeared to know what he was talking about. The *Times* once prided itself on the civility of its discourse and its attention to issues.

The fancy men are on a different track. Fervor is more important than fact. Frank Rich, in way over his head, accused “anonymous smear artists” of a “particularly loathsome” strike against Colin Powell’s wife. Rich suspected they were “the leaders of far-right GOP auxiliaries with pious names like the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council.” After all, he wrote, it was “a rather remarkable coincidence” that at the same time they were criticizing Powell, someone “peddled” a story about Mrs. Powell suffering from depression to the press. That Mrs. Powell takes antidepressants, Rich wrote, is “completely irrelevant to American politics, except, of course, to those bullies on the far right who hope they can keep General Powell out of the race with preemptive strikes below the belt.” To emphasize the point, his column had a nice little subhead: “The right unpacks its dirty tricks.”

Rich’s insinuations were untrue. Indeed, Powell himself dismissed them. When he gracefully removed himself from consideration as a presidential candidate, he said his wife’s condition was “widely known,” not only by their “circle of friends” but also by “many in the media.” He also said he had no problem with the way it was disclosed in the press.

So much for the anonymous smear artists: it seems they never existed. *Times* fancy men impugn the motives and methods of the one side but never of the other. In his commentary on Powell’s departure, Anthony Lewis wrote that “incivility is a mild word for the ugliness that has increas-

ingly marked American politics." His principal example was the "vitriol" that he said was being poured on Bill Clinton. Just above Lewis on the op-ed page, however, Bob Herbert was declaring that "Republican politics in the age of Gingrich are not just mean, they are vicious" — "deliberately crafted" to hurt the poor and the helpless. On the facing page, a *Times* editorial characterized Republican tactics to force Clinton to accept a budget resolution as "an ugly game of political coercion." When Democrats used the same tactics on Reagan and Bush, the *Times* never said they were ugly.

**W**hether anyone listens to the *Times* on these matters is moot. Its metropolitan circulation is down, while that of Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* is up, and its political posture makes it look like a member of an *ancien régime* whose dominoes are all falling. It knows something is happening, but it is unsure just what, and so it looks for a defensible position. A cover story in the *Times* Sunday magazine championed Sheila Burke, Bob Dole's chief of staff, as a victim of the "conservative attack machine." The *Times* has never shown much sympathy for Dole, or any special interest in his staffers, but in fancy-man journalism they can have their uses.

The real subject of the magazine piece was not Burke; it was the "attack machine" — a supposedly well-financed, rigidly ideological, and decidedly gamy network of organizations and individuals, all intent on turning moderate, respectable conservatism toward its own nefarious and somewhat batty right-wing ends. Burke, the story said, ran afoul of the network — exactly how was not clear — and so it set out to ruin her. A *Wall Street Journal* columnist said she had "undue policy influence." Then Phyllis Schlafly called her "Hillary-lite." A day later, Paul Weyrich upped this to "Clinton-lite." Robert Novak wrote that she was "Queen of the Senate." As invective goes, this may seem pallid, but the *Times* insisted it was strong stuff. Queen of the Senate, it said, was "a particularly loaded phrase." Apparently, it reflected the attack machine's fear of "a woman's achieving power."

The article, entitled "The Campaign to Demonize Sheila Burke," was a neat, though cheesy, trick. Dole's long-time chief of staff is probably tough enough to eat rusty beer cans for breakfast, but we were meant to think of her as a battered woman. Conservatives were not demonizing Burke so much as the *Times* was finding a new way to demonize conservatives. Fancy-man journalism rests on the premise of a right-wing threat, and often it takes pains to invent one. The magazine article's special contribution was to posit the threat as a huge amorphous blob, darkening the political atmosphere mostly by its screechy voice and bad manners. The conservatives who made up the attack machine seemed to lack any substantive ideas. They dealt only in prejudices, rudely expressed and dishonestly delivered.

As an example, the *Times* gave us *The Bell Curve*, the book by Charles Murray and the late Richard J. Herrnstein. It was only because of a clever marketing strategy, the article insisted, that the book attracted the attention it did. Apparently, Murray had hidden the book's lack of merit by refusing to circulate its galley proofs before publication. According to the *Times*, this left the critics ill-equipped to heap the opprobrium on *The Bell Curve* that it deserved. Consequently, the *Times* said, "there was a blizzard of uninformed speculation on whether blacks are at a genetic disadvantage to whites, reintroducing to public debate a subject once thought to have been safely buried."

But that was hardly an accurate description of the reception that greeted *The Bell Curve*. Whether they were informed or not, the reviews were mostly hostile, and some were simply venomous. However, one of the few thoughtful reviews *The Bell Curve* did receive in a major publication was in the Sunday book review of the *Times*. The review, by Malcolm Browne, a respected science writer, recognized *The Bell Curve* as a serious piece of work. Browne concluded his review by saying a society that ignored the subject of human intelligence would do so "at its peril," and he pleaded for further discourse. "It is hard to imagine a democratic society," he wrote, "doing otherwise."

But it is not hard to imagine it if the thought police prevail. The politically

incorrect review attracted enormous attention. Murray was anathema to liberals, and it seemed inconceivable that *The Bell Curve* had not been trashed. If the book was to be taken seriously, its findings might threaten many social programs, from remedial reading through job training to affirmative action. That would not do, of course, and assigning Browne to review the book rather than some tame academic was inconsistent with book review practice. What had happened at the *Times*?

Actually, not much. The book review editor later told colleagues she had no idea *The Bell Curve* would be so contentious; she had assigned it to a science writer because it seemed to be a book about science. There was no more to it than that. Intellectual integrity had been served by accident. *The Bell Curve* had slipped through the cracks.

**S**kip ahead now a year and then some to "The Campaign to Demonize Sheila Burke." The *Times* is explaining away an old mistake. Murray had played a cheap stunt by not circulating the galley proofs; he had sneaked his pernicious book past the gatekeepers through fraud. The Sunday magazine is giving away the game here. Murray is part of the conservative attack machine, and none of its ideas ever matter. Indeed, they probably are downright dangerous. The Sunday magazine article manages never to discuss them in its fulsome twelve pages.

It reduces them instead to sound bites. Members of the attack machine say things like "Slick Willie," "feminazi," and "quota queen." In real life, however, they say much more than that; according to the *Times*, the attack machine includes among its components the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Free Congress Foundation, Concerned Women for America, American Enterprise Institute, and Eagle Forum, not to mention the Bradley, Olin, and Scaife trusts, as well as the *Washington Times*, *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, and, of course, this magazine.

This is a formidable array of organizations, and many of them have something to say. If the *Times* should ever swallow its pride and listen, its circulation might stop declining. ❧



by Benjamin J. Stein

# Toughest Nails

**R**ing, ring, goes the bell. Up from a deep sleep. It's a woman from MacNeil/Lehrer (now "The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer"). "You've been recommended highly by a professor at the University of Pennsylvania to appear on our show on Monday about race in America."

"I have to think about this," I said. "I had a very bad experience last time I was on TV talking about race."

"Well, this is going to be a very sensible discussion, very cool, very restrained and thoughtful," she said. "A group of important black and white historians talking about race in America."

"And you want me?"

"Definitely," she said. "Now, what will you say once you're on?"

"I guess I would say that black people in this country have suffered terribly over the past several hundred years. They were still suffering terribly until about twenty years ago."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh," she said, obviously taking this down.

"And, in fact, they were really still suffering when I was a child to the point that it was criminal. But in recent years, I think their suffering is largely self-inflicted. White America has done an almost unbelievable job in correcting its racism. Official, legally sanctioned racism is a thing of the past, at least against blacks. There is no historic precedent for the revolution of decency in America about helping blacks and stopping hurting blacks. I think that now the gates are wide open for blacks, and if they do not come through the gates, that's very largely

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because of pathology within their community. If they would start behaving like Finns, and have fewer out of wedlock babies, stronger families, take advantage of the educational system, and really work with discipline for a better life for them and their children, they would soon live at least as well as whites." (Of course, I'm not sure I live like a Finn . . .)

There was a weighty sigh and a pause at the other end of the phone. "Are you saying that things have actually gotten better in America? That there's less racism?"

"Oh, definitely," I said. "No doubt about it."

There was an even longer pause. "Well," she said softly, "maybe this isn't the right show for you to be on. But I can promise you that we'll be using you soon on some other show. Just in case, maybe you should tell me your credentials."

"I'll call you later," I said. "I'm on my way to a business meeting."

Gee, I wonder why many Americans don't trust PBS.

**I** hustled off to my meeting, which was downtown with a very funny, smart lawyer named Kevin Roddy. It's about a case I am not allowed to discuss. Suffice it to say, it's one of the more fascinating cases I have ever come across. On the other hand, I almost always think these cases are fascinating. My pals ask me how I can find the whole subject of bonds and default rates so interesting. I tell them that if you get deeply into almost any subject it becomes interesting.

After my meeting, I headed to the airport on the virtually new Century Freeway. It goes through South Central L.A. to the airport. The sky was a sickening light gray from smog. The landscape was utterly featureless. The cars on the freeway were

dented and old. They drove recklessly, drivers staring forward without expression.

In a few minutes I was off the freeway and on my way to American Airlines. The airport was under a "heightened security alert," yellow and black signs everywhere. I checked in and went to the Admirals' Club. Guards everywhere. Plainclothes cops behind the check-in desk. The baggage area was locked up. Could Al-Fatah have called in? Does Hezbollah know about Platinum AAdvantage?

Off I went on Flight 36 to Washington, D.C. I got into my seat and soon I was in the kind of haze I get into when I am half asleep and the headphones are playing Bob Dylan's "Desire" for the millionth time.

Willie and Frank kept coming to mind, and the days when black people led sad lives indeed in this blessed America.

Willie was the janitor at my grade school, Parkside Elementary, which was beautifully set in a grove of trees next to still lovely Sligo Creek Park. Like every school in the sovereign state of Maryland, Parkside was racially segregated. White children only. The sole black face was Willie's. He was a portly man with a gold capped tooth. He would walk up and down our school's one hallway, tossing resin out onto the floor and then sweeping up the dust it collected with his push broom. I can still smell that resin and remember Willie whistling. He knew the name of every boy and girl at Parkside, and always was friendly. Sometimes he would chuck us behind the ear or even pretend to throw a punch. He had been in World War II in some capacity, and now he was the janitor.

The school was heated by a coal-fired basement furnace. To make sure we were warm on winter days, Willie would get up at dawn or maybe before. He drove in