

Top Ten Censored Stories of 2003-2004

Written by Deanna Zandt and Evan Derkacz
Tuesday, 05 October 2004 18:00

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In Minot, North Dakota, in 2002, a train derailed at 1:30 a.m., spilling 200,000 gallons of deadly gas. All six commercial radio stations in the area were owned by Clear Channel, and all six were fully automated. As a result, the stations weren't switched over to the emergency broadcasting frequency, and the news wasn't properly disseminated to the local population. One man who tried to get in his car died; others suffered burns or were partially blinded. It was an hour and a half before officials could finally reach anyone at the station to broadcast the emergency alert.

This incident, reported last year as one of Project Censored's top censored stories of 2002-3, offers a window into the larger problem of media consolidation wherein corporations, eager to cut costs and loathe to disturb the interests of those in power, have already eaten up most of the media landscape. In the process they've neglected some of the most crucial information the American citizenry needs for our democracy to survive. Though an unprecedented number of concerned citizens spoke out against the recent attempt by the FCC to further deregulate the media, we've already seen the number of bold, independent-minded, Watergate-type stories diminish in frequency with each passing year.

Every year, in response to these concerns, Project Censored creates a list of its top "censored" stories of the year. Though it might more accurately be called "Project Not-Mentioned-Enough," the list does provide crucial facts and perspectives that every citizen ought to know before stepping into a voting booth.

1. Wealth inequality in 21st Century threatens economy and democracy.

The corporate media's coverage of "the economy" is usually restricted to the rolling hills of the stock market, fluctuating rates of "consumer spending," or corporations' quarterly-profit reports. Seldom is there any discussion of the *distribution* of these indicators of the national purse. Were the gap between the rich and poor to be a part of the discussion, the nightly news' numbers would tell the story of an America few would recognize.

Edward Wolff, a professor of economics at New York University, points out that while wealth

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inequality (“wealth” is defined as assets and income minus debt) fell from 1929 through 1976 or so, it has risen sharply since then. As it stood in 1998, the wealthiest 5 percent of this nation owned more (59 percent) than the other 95 percent put together. And that’s well before Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthy were even a glimmer in the neo-conservative eye. In fact, when compared to the egalitarian promised land of Sweden, up until the early 1970s the U.S. had a lower wealth inequality.

And should you not have any ethical problems with this inequality, recent studies provide reasons for even number-crunchers to worry. Wolff explains: “There is now a lot of evidence, based on cross-national comparisons of inequality and economic growth, that more unequal societies actually have lower rates of economic growth.” It boils down to this: Inequality leads to poor schooling for the majority who in turn mature into a less capable, less ambitious, and less talented pool of workers than many other nations’ kids, whose systems provide an adequate education to all.

This is a recent and reversible phenomenon, according to David Cay Johnston, a Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* reporter. He comments on the media’s mistaken treatment of “think tanks” as intellectual institutions instead of as “ideological marketing organizations” that “favor the super-rich.”

Johnston challenges another cherished media myth: “Most Americans believe we take from people at the top to benefit those below. And what I show in [my] book from the data is that’s not the case. Our national myth – and I use that in the classic sense of the word ‘myth’ – is wrong. We take from people who make \$30,000 to \$500,000 to give relief to those who make millions, or tens and hundreds of millions of dollars a year.”

This trend is mirrored across the globe, where one in six people lives in slums. UN-habitat estimates that if governments don’t work to remedy the situation, “a third of the world’s population will be slum dwellers within 30 years. ... Unplanned, unsanitary settlements threaten both political and fiscal stability within Third World countries, where urban slums are growing faster than expected.” Or: While we fight the “war on terror,” we are neglecting a much greater threat to world stability: poverty.

Multinational Monitor, May 2003, “The Wealth Divide” (an interview with Edward Wolff), by Robert Weissman; Buzzflash, March 26 and 29, 2004, “A Buzzflash Interview, Parts I & II” (with David Cay Johnston); London Guardian, October 4, 2003, “Every third person will be a slum dweller within 30 years, UN agency warns,” by John Vidal; Multinational Monitor, July/August 2003, “Grotesque Inequality,” by Robert Weissman.

2. Ashcroft vs. the human rights law that holds corporations accountable.

Every now and again ordinary citizens find ways of bringing international criminals and human-rights abusers to justice. One such case is the successful use of an obscure law, re-discovered in 1980, called the Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789. Originally enacted to combat piracy in international waters, it has been used with increasing frequency to help “victims of serious rights abuses committed overseas by foreign government leaders and senior military

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officials, as well as U.S. and foreign-owned corporations, to get a hearing before U.S. federal courts." It was used in the successful suit brought by Holocaust survivors against Swiss banks and companies that used slave labor during World War II.

The law was exhumed in 1980 by the father and sister of a Paraguayan boy who was kidnapped and tortured to death. When the police officer responsible for the killing later came to the U.S., the family invoked the law, which was upheld by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. Jim Lobe, who has reported on the rulings, notes that the 1980 ruling "was followed by a number of high-profile cases against foreign national leaders, such as Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, and senior army or security officers from Guatemala, Indonesia, Argentina, Ethiopia, and El Salvador, among other countries."

But now, in spite of (or perhaps related to) these success stories, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft is seeking to abolish the law, arguing that it, according to a Justice Department brief, "raises significant potential for serious interference with important foreign-policy interests."

Human Rights Watch Director Tom Malinowski noted that the State Department has indicated little to no support for abolishing the law and added: "I don't think this has anything to do with the war on terror. ... I think this is motivated by a very hard-core ideological resistance within the Justice Department to the whole concept of international law being enforced. The notion that international norms are enforceable by anyone is repugnant to some in the Justice Department."

OneWorld.Net and Asheville Global Report, May 19, 2003, "Ashcroft goes after 200-year-old human-rights law," by Jim Lobe.

3. Bush administration manipulates science and censors scientists.

This is one story that actually involves censorship by the Bush administration.

Robert F. Kennedy, head of the Natural Resources Defense Council, exposes one particularly egregious example of Bush's EPA out-and-out lying to the public. Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he and a partner experienced breathing problems at their office near the WTC. They were able to close up shop, but: "Many workers did not have that option; their employers relied on the EPA's nine press releases between September and December of 2001 reassuring the public about the wholesome air quality downtown. We have since learned that the government was lying to us. An Inspector General's report released last August revealed that the EPA's data did not support those assurances, and that its press releases were being drafted or doctored by White House officials intent on re-opening Wall Street."

A study by the EPA found that the bipartisan Senate Clear Air bill would do more to prevent American deaths than the Bush administration's proposed air-pollution plan, known as "Clear Skies." This study was promptly repressed by the Bush administration. According to Kevin Knobloch, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists, "This is akin to the White House directing the National Weather Service to alter a hurricane forecast because they want

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everyone to think we have clear skies ahead. ... The hurricane is still coming, but without factual information, no one will be ready for it.”

An Environmental News Service report summed it up thusly: “President George W. Bush has suppressed and distorted scientific analysis from federal agencies, subjected government scientists to ‘censorship and political oversight,’ and taken actions that have undermined the quality of scientific advisory panels.”

The result, according to a former head of the National Science Foundation: “This will have serious consequences for public health.”

Finally, Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-California) compiled a 39-page report called “Politics & Science in the Bush Administration,” detailing the administration’s abuses of science in 20 separate categories. One example of many: “In the summer of 2002, CDC’s Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention was preparing to confront the controversial issue of whether to expand the diagnosis of lead poisoning to include children with lower levels of blood lead. For more than a decade, the committee had advised intervention if levels measured 10 micrograms per deciliter or greater. While the lead industry has opposed lowering the standard, recent research has suggested that the cognitive development of children may be impaired at levels of five micrograms per deciliter or lower. As the committee prepared to consider changing the standard, HHS Secretary Thompson removed or rejected several qualified scientists and replaced them with lead-industry consultants.”

The Nation, March 8, 2004, “The Junk Science of George W. Bush,” by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.; Censorship News: The National Coalition Against Censorship Newsletter, fall 2003, “Censoring Scientific Information”; Environment News Service and OneWorld.Net, February 20, 2004, “Ranking Scientists Warn Bush Science Policy Lacks Integrity,” by Sunny Lewis; office of U.S. Representative Henry A. Waxman, August 2003, “Politics & Science in the Bush Administration.”

4. High uranium levels found in troops and civilians.

The Uranium Medical Research Center studied Afghan civilians a few months after U.S. attacks and found that of the samples taken, *every single one* had levels of non-depleted uranium, four to 20 times higher than normal. This non-depleted uranium is even more toxic than the depleted uranium that, according to Lauren Moret, president of Scientists for Indigenous People and an environmental commissioner for the City of Berkeley, accounts for “more than 240,000 Gulf War veterans ... on permanent medical disability and more than 11,000 ... dead.”

Moret goes on to point out that “in a U.S. government study, conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs on post-Gulf War babies, 67 percent were found to have serious birth defects or serious illnesses. They were born without eyes, ears, had missing organs, missing legs and arms, fused fingers, thyroid or other organ malformations.”

Neither type of uranium is able to discriminate between enemy soldiers, civilians, and our very

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own troops, which means that if the Afghan population has it, then so will our troops.

And according to an April 3, 2004, report in the *New York Daily News*, it's happening again: "A nuclear-medicine expert who examined and tested nine soldiers from the company [returning from Iraq] says that four 'almost certainly' inhaled radioactive dust from exploded American shells manufactured with depleted uranium."

The U.S. Army, which continues to use depleted uranium in shells and as tank armor (to name a few of its current uses), denies that depleted uranium has any negative consequences for its troops. The *Daily News* goes on to report, however, that "in January 2003, the European Parliament called for a moratorium on their use after reports of an unusual number of leukemia deaths among Italian soldiers who served in Kosovo, where depleted-uranium weapons were used."

Uranium Medical Research Center, January 2003, "UMRC's Preliminary Findings from Afghanistan & Operation Enduring Freedom" and "Afghan Field Trip #2 Report: Precision Destruction – Indiscriminate Effects," by Tedd Weyman; Awakened Woman, January 2004, "Scientists Uncover Radioactive Trail in Afghanistan," by Stephanie Hiller; Dissident Voice, March 2004, "There Are No Words ... Radiation in Iraq Equals 250,000 Nagasaki Bombs," by Bob Nichols; New York Daily News, April 5, 2004, "Poisoned?" by Juan Gonzalez; Information Clearing House, March 2004, "International Criminal Tribunal for Afghanistan at Tokyo, The People Vs. George Bush," by Professor Ms Niloufer Bhagwat J.

5. The wholesale giveaway of our natural resources.

Adam Werbach, writing for *In These Times*, has made this bold assertion about the Bush administration's treatment of natural resources: "There has not been such a wholesale giveaway of our common assets to corporate interests since the presidency of William McKinley (1897-1901)."

Werbach writes: "Soon after Bush took office, Vice President Dick Cheney convened a secretive energy task force to craft the administration's agenda. They recommended two major efforts: lower the environmental bar and pay corporations to jump over it. With the help of Enron's Ken Lay and other gas and oil industry leaders, they laid out a set of plans to weaken existing environmental regulations and provide a multibillion-dollar package of tax incentives to increase oil and gas production."

The truth is, it's very difficult to say for sure who was present at this meeting. While the media has reported that the nation's energy policy was written during a meeting with undisclosed participants (rumored to be gas and oil industry leaders), they have been pretty lax in connecting this secretive task force with the sweetheart policies that have followed.

Still, it doesn't take a list of Cheney's cronies to accurately report on the administration's track record. One of Werbach's examples is natural-gas mining in Wyoming. To make a long story short, your tax dollars (3 billion of them) are subsidizing the extraction of natural gas, which would not normally be cost-effective, because, in the process of gaining access to the buried

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coal deposits, more than 700 million gallons of publicly owned water must be removed from aquifers that stand in the way.

Werbach goes on to explore the administration's Orwellian environmental-protection language and the media's largely uncritical adoption of it. From the "Healthy Forests Initiative" to the "Clear Skies Act" (which some have dubbed the "Clear Lies Act"), the media has seldom pointed out that these policies, by any objective standard (that is, not based on the words of those profiting from them), are disastrous to the common good.

In These Times, November 23, 2003, "Liquidation of the Commons," by Adam Werbach; *High Country News*, June 9, 2003, "Giant Sequoias Could Get the Ax," by Matt Weiser.

6. Sale of electoral politics.

As much hope as electronic voting offers (ease of use, access for the disabled, etc.), it brings just as many reasons for skepticism and fear. A look behind the curtain reveals that the programmers and manufacturers of the machines are a combination of defense contractors and corporations headed by staunch Republicans whose programming codes are faulty and whose results are impossible to verify.

Still, despite the partisan nature of the manufacturers, the problem could be solved with paper receipts and nonpartisan audits. But thus far, bipartisan attempts to require such receipts and audits that would ensure popular confidence in our democracy haven't been a priority for Congress.

What do we have to show for electronic voting's record so far? And why do we have to go to London to learn it? Writing for the *London Independent*, Andrew Gumbel informs us that Roy Barnes, Georgia's Democratic incumbent governor, held a 10-point lead in polls shortly before the 2002 election, while Max Cleland held a two- to five-point lead over his opponent in the state's Senate race. The results, in this first all-electronic election, greatly contradicted all available polling and demographic information. The governor's race swung 16 points to the advantage of the Republican challenger, while the Senate race swung between nine and 12 points – also to the Republican challenger.

But few, if any, in the media sought to investigate this event. And Republican upsets didn't end there; according to Gumbel, "There were others in Colorado, Minnesota, Illinois, and New Hampshire – all in races that had been flagged as key partisan battlegrounds, and all won by the Republican Party."

Here's the kicker: "The vote count was not conducted by state elections officials, but by the private company that sold Georgia the voting machines in the first place, under a strict trade-secrecy contract that made it not only difficult but actually illegal – on pain of stiff criminal penalties – for the state to touch the equipment or examine the proprietary software to ensure the machines worked properly."

Here, from the same report, is a story begging to be told on network news: Senator Chuck

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Hagel, a \$5-million investor in ES&S – one of the larger voting-systems manufacturers – “became the first Republican in 24 years to be elected to the Senate from Nebraska, cheered on by the *Omaha World-Herald* newspaper, which also happens to be a big investor in ES&S. ... Eighty percent of Mr. Hagel’s winning votes – both in 1996 and in 2002 – were counted, under the usual terms of confidentiality, by his own company.”

In These Times, December 2003, “Voting Machines Gone Wild,” by Mark Lewellen-Biddle; *Independent/UK*, October 13, 2003, “All The President’s Votes?” by Andrew Gumbel; *Democracy Now!*, September 4, 2003, “Will Bush Backers Manipulate Votes to Deliver GW Another Election?” by Amy Goodman and the staff of *Democracy Now!*

7. Conservative organization drives judicial appointments.

One of the most influential, yet underreported, legal factors in the lives of Americans is not who our lawmakers are, but how our laws are interpreted once they are passed. The federal courts often are considered the “guardians of the Constitution,” because their rulings protect rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution.

In 2001 George W. Bush eliminated the longstanding role of the American Bar Association (ABA) in the evaluation of prospective federal judges. ABA’s judicial ratings had long kept extremists from the right and left off the bench. In its place, Bush has been using The Federalist Society for Law & Public Policy Studies – a national organization whose stated mission is to advance a conservative agenda by moving the country’s legal system to the right.

Started in 1982 and drawing on support from conservatives such as John Ashcroft, Solicitor General Theodore Olson, Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Antonin Scalia, and Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Orrin Hatch, the Federalist Society has not only been aggressive in its tactics to appoint new judges – 40 percent of Bush appointees are Federalist members – but also in attacking non-member judges. Hostility cast on Third Circuit Judge H. Lee Sarokin forced him to resign. “I see my life’s work and reputation being disparaged on an almost daily basis,” he said, “and I find myself unable to ignore it.”

Martin Garbus and Jamin Raskin reported on this phenomenon in March 2003. “While presidents and congressmen get elected every few years, judicial appointments are for life, and some federal court appointments have gone from 40 to 50 years,” says Garbus. “Our courts deal with nearly every aspect of our life: work conditions and wages, schools, civil rights, affirmative action, crime and punishment, abortion and the environment, amongst others.”

Since the publication of their articles, Bush tried to force through the most conservative group of nominees ever submitted by a president. He succeeded at times, but other appointments were rejected or stalled. Bush retaliated by making appointments while Congress was not in session. On May 18, 2004, Bush agreed not to make further recess appointments, and the Democrats agreed to let Bush have 25 “free” appointments.

The American Prospect, March 1, 2003, “A Hostile Takeover: How the Federalist Society Is Capturing the Federal Courts,” by Martin Garbus; “Courts Vs. Citizens,” by Jamin Raskin

8. Secrets of Cheney's energy task force come to light.

During 2000-1, blackouts, oil and natural gas shortages and a dramatic rise in oil imports (over 50 percent for the first time in history) prompted Bush to establish a task force charged with developing a long-range plan to meet U.S. energy requirements. With the advice of his close friend and largest campaign contributor, Enron CEO Ken Lay, Bush picked Vice President Dick Cheney, former Halliburton CEO, to head this group.

In 2001 the task force formulated the National Energy Policy, or Cheney Report, bypassing possibilities for energy independence and reduced oil consumption with a declaration of ambitions to establish new sources of oil. Via a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit in 2003, documents revealed the task force's interest in Iraqi oilfields as early as March 2001, pre-9/11.

Most major-media news organizations have published articles depicting various aspects of the energy crisis the United States continues to find itself in, and its effect on the current foreign policy in the Middle East, Africa, and the Caspian Sea basin. Almost all, however, are reluctant to tie Cheney Report, U.S. military policy, and current energy policies together.

Judicial Watch, July 17, 2003, "Cheney Energy Task Force Documents Feature Map of Iraqi Oilfields"; Foreign Policy in Focus, January 2004, "Bush-Cheney Energy Strategy: Procuring the Rest of the World's Oil," by Michael Klare.

9. Widow brings RICO case against U.S. government for 9/11.

Under the Civil Racketeering, Influences, & Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act, Ellen Mariani is suing President Bush and other U.S. officials for malfeasant conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and wrongful death. Her husband, Louis Neil Mariani, was a passenger on Flight 175, which was flown into the south tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11.

The suit documents the detailed forewarnings from foreign governments and FBI agents; the unprecedented delinquency of our air defense; the inexplicable half-hour dawdle of our commander in chief at a primary school after hearing the nation was under attack; the incessant invocation of national security and executive privilege to suppress the facts; and the obstruction of subsequent efforts to investigate the disaster. It concludes that compelling evidence will be presented in this case, through discovery, subpoena power, and testimony, that defendants failed to act to prevent 9/11, knowing the attacks would lead to an international war on terror.

Berg believes that defendant Bush is invoking a long-standard operating procedure of national security and executive privilege claims to suppress the basis of this lawsuit.

On November 26, 2003, a press conference was set up to discuss the full implications of these charges. Only Fox News attended the conference and taped 40 minutes; however, the film was never aired.

Scoop.co.nz, November 2003, "911 Victim's Wife Files RICO Case Against GW Bush," by Philip J. Berg; Scoop.co.nz, December 2003, "Widow's Bush Treason Suit Vanishes," by W.

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David Kubiak.

10. New nuke plants: Taxpayers support, industry profits.

Senator Peter Domenici (R-New Mexico), along with the Bush Administration, is looking to give the nuclear-power industry a huge boost through the new Energy Policy Act. Through multi-pronged efforts contained within the bill, \$6-billion to \$15-billion tax-production credits for new nuclear reactors would be issued, and would allow depleted uranium to be treated as “low level” waste, requiring the Department of Energy to take possession and dispose of waste generated at privately owned facilities (at no cost to the owner).

Through the efforts of the Nuclear Information & Resource Service and many other national and local activists and environmental groups, the Energy Bill (HR-6) was defeated on November 21, 2003 by a cloture vote of 57-40. Bill proponents could not overcome a filibuster supported by both Republicans and Democrats.

However, the legislation has been split by Domenici into two separate bills addressing policy and tax issues separately. The policy-sectioned bill has failed; Domenici continues to campaign for the addition of the tax credits to nuclear industries as amendments to other bills.

Nuclear Information & Resource Service, November 17, 2003, “Nuclear Energy Would Get \$7.5 Billion in Tax Subsidies, U.S. Taxpayers Would Fund Nuclear Monitor Relapse If Energy Bill Passes,” by Cindy Folkers and Michael Mariotte; Wise/NIRS Nuclear Monitor, August 2003, “U.S. Senate Passes Pro-Nuclear Energy Bill,” by Cindy Folkers and Michael Mariotte.

This story comes from AlterNet, the news service of the alternative press.