

Letters to the Editor  
Los Angeles Times  
Times Mirror Square  
Los Angeles, CA 90053

NOT  
Printed

May 28, 1992

Dear editor,

It seems that David Shaw's report on the lonely coverage of LAPD's "hard-charging deadly style of policing" by the alternative paper LA Weekly was so painful to write that he had to "balance" it with a gratuitous editorial comment about the Weekly's "longtime image of journalistic irresponsibility prompted by ideological bias." ("Media Failed to Examine Alleged LAPD Abuses," Los Angeles Times, May 26, pp. A20-21.)

In fact, during the 80s, I relied on the Weekly for hard data on human rights abuses committed by President Reagan's "freedom fighters," the contras, against the peasants of Nicaragua, and on similar atrocities committed by U.S.-sponsored governments against their own peoples. The Weekly's reports--also far ahead of the Times in this period--were in close agreement with similar accounts from Americas Watch, Amnesty International, and other human rights monitoring groups without "irresponsible" images.

I finally cancelled my Times subscription in frustration over its human rights coverage. Unfortunately, Shaw's sophisticated swipe at the Weekly justifies a suspicion that the *mea culpas* now heard over the Times' inadequate reporting of local police violence will in the long run give me no reason to re-subscribe. I would like to be proven wrong, of course.

Sincerely,

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Bill Becker

(I did not expect this letter to be printed, and it wasn't. I sent a copy to David Shaw, to which he replied. The meat of my response to his reply follows. Since Shaw replied in a personal letter to me, I didn't want to include it. My full reply to him contains an offer to discuss his notions of "journalistic responsibility" in open court, so I feel ok about passing along my thoughts on that issue.)

[I seem to have lost or misplaced  
Shaw's response to me. Totally  
irresponsible. B.B. (8 Oct 2009)]

David Shaw, staff writer  
Los Angeles Times  
Times Mirror Square  
Los Angeles, CA 90053

June 20, 1992

Dear Mr. Shaw,

Thanks so much for replying to my letter-to-the-editor that I sent you. I am not used to receiving such a thoughtful response from people as busy as you must be.

I believe that the points you raise in your letter should also be addressed, and I hope that you will not think me churlish if I continue to disagree with you. Although I make some hard points, I have tried to craft my response in a spirit of friendly debate. I hope this will mitigate any understandable annoyance you might feel toward that particular kind of person who will not let a subject die. I have included a copy each of my letter-to-the-editor and your letter to me for easy reference should you decide to pore over the following tract.

(After reading your letter, I reread the 2nd and 3rd articles of your series with the care I should have used on my first reading of them. My apologies for being less diligent than I should have been.)

I want to discuss three major points, not necessarily in the following order:

First, my suggestion that your comment about the Weekly was gratuitous;

Second, your assertion that "responsible journalism" calls for the "identification" of the Weekly as:

- a. "an alternative newspaper ... which has begun to shed its longtime image of journalistic irresponsibility prompted by ideological bias." (Times, May 26) and,
- b. "an alternative paper long dismissed as ideologically biased and journalistically unreliable;" (May 27) but that is now
- c. "greatly improved since Kit Rachlis took over ..." and has published "several stories on the LAPD that have won widespread praise." [including kudos from Warren Christopher. -- B.B.] (May 27)

Third, your reason for choosing the above "journalistically responsible" identifications of the Weekly:

"identifying your source (the Weekly) for those who may not be familiar with it or who may automatically dismiss whatever it says. Whatever the merits of some of [the Weekly's] coverage of important issues over the years, I do not think any reasonable reader could have denied its ideological agenda. Indeed, that was its *raison d'etre*."

The major problem here is that the notion of "bias" itself (to say nothing of "ideological bias") is highly problematic, touching as it does on the thorny philosophic notions of truth and meaning, as well as on the difficult psychological notions of personal motivation and intelligence per se. Nevertheless, it is often used for one of two contrary purposes: to refer to another's point-of-view for which strong evidence of "ideological bias" exists; or to avoid serious discussion of an issue by donning a mantle-of-perfect-objectivity oneself. Unfortunately, in the absence of an effort to demonstrate the alleged "ideological bias" of the accused, there is usually no way to tell which of these two motives is operative.

Your articles are intended to report the way that the LAPD has been covered, over the long term, by certain local papers. The series is not a report on how the L.A. Weekly compared to its mainstream counterparts in reporting past events in general. Such an analysis is the proper subject of a different series, and would require a case-by-case comparison, augmented by some fairly diligent independent investigation, of reporting on major events by the local papers. Such an analysis would allow the reader to come to his or her own conclusion as to which papers were on average most trustworthy, and particularly whether the Weekly was "journalistically unreliable."

In furtherance of my claim here, let us imagine that for some reason you neglected to "identify" the Weekly as any other than an "alternative" newspaper, and that some other media critic had sent you a letter scoring you for not pointing out, "for readers that may not be familiar with it," that while the Daily News may now be the "scrappy challenger" (with all the appealing connotations that go with that appellation), as the Green Sheet it had a reputation for being a very conservative, even right-wing, paper.

I am generally not a betting man, but I would lay down a fair amount of money here that your response to such a critic would be very similar to the general outline of my claim above--namely, that the series was not intended to be a study of overall past practice of the papers in question. What do you think? Also, why didn't you feel a professional responsibility to point out the conserv-

ative nature of the old Green Sheet? Do conservative papers not suffer "ideological bias?" Are they automatically "journalistically responsible?" Or, is there some objective distance from the center, inside which a paper is "responsible" and outside of which it is "irresponsible," and to which measurement the Green Sheet and old Weekly are subject?

In any case, you did not really "identify" the Weekly at all. You only informed "readers who may not be familiar with it" that they are mistaken if they believe it always had a good reputation among some unspecified set of the reading public. (Worse yet, you do not identify this sector in any way, nor do you provide the reader with any information as to whether readers in this group might themselves be biased.) Readers with a knee-jerk fear of being outside the mainstream will thank you for setting them straight, but those who relied on the Weekly will continue to make up their own minds.

I suggest that the reference "alternative newspaper" is by itself adequate to "identify" the Weekly in the minds of most Times readers, most of whom have been around long enough to know what an "alternative" paper is, and why. Thus, I stand by my use of the term "gratuitous," here used in Webster's sense of being "without cause or justification; uncalled for."<sup>1</sup>

Aside from these considerations, I think there is a deeper problem with point three above. You clearly do not want Times readers who might be unfamiliar with the Weekly to get the wrong idea about its past performance on the basis of the positive things you and others are saying about it now.

For those who hold a low opinion of the "old" Weekly, you want to inform them that they should not now "automatically dismiss anything it says." To be blunt, I suggest that each of these goals is thoroughly contradicted by your next statement:

"Whatever the merits of some of [the Weekly's] coverage of important issues over the years, I do not think any reasonable reader could have denied its ideological agenda. Indeed, that was its *raison d'être*."

It is reasonable for me to assume that this statement acknowledges, and even goes beyond my reference to the Weekly's good record of reporting on President Reagan's contra war in

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, College Edition, The World Publishing Company, 1960.

Nicaragua. In the face of this statement, your comment about a "reasonable reader's" recognition of the Weekly's "ideological agenda" is both irrelevant and illogical.

If the Weekly printed meritorious reports on "important issues over the years," why even raise the notion of an "ideological agenda." Moreover, would not the "reasonable reader," just because of its "merits," and in spite of its "ideological agenda," conclude that the Weekly might not be such a bad paper after all. Indeed, a "reasonable reader" might well conclude that if a paper with an "ideological agenda" is meritorious on "important issues over the years," maybe that ideology itself deserves to be taken more seriously.

Notice, too, that you mentioned the Weekly's "merits" only in this private letter to me. Since nowhere in your series do you say that you personally felt that the Weekly was an unreliable, journalistically irresponsible paper, let me ask whether it occurred to you that the pre-Rachlis Weekly might have earned a few positive comments in your article? If so, why didn't you include them? Or, is your present acknowledgement of the old Weekly's merits simply a matter of being reminded of them? If so, how do we decide whether the omission was inadvertent or the result of some sort of bias on your part? (More on this below.)

In any case, it should be clear that your comment to me could not have been included in your series without seriously weakening, if not destroying outright, the credibility of that unspecified sector whose low opinion of the Weekly you felt the need to report.

Your exercise in "journalistic responsibility" in fact serves no more useful purpose than could have been achieved by simply reporting how the Weekly covered the LAPD and letting each Times reader (reasonable-almost-by-definition, of course) draw his or her own conclusion. The worst that could have happened is that a few Times readers might have picked up the Weekly, and decided either to read it along with the Times, or that it was not up to their standards.

Let me mention now the most important implication of your choice to report this alleged opinion of an unspecified sector of the public as to the Weekly's "ideological bias." It is, of course, that the Times, as represented by its reporters, editors, and managers, does not itself suffer from ideological bias. This is a radically mistaken notion even on general psychological and philosophic principles.

As regards what the Times's specific bias might be, I suggest that it is expressed fairly well as follows:

"the reasonable point-of-view never engenders strong feelings."

Thus, reasonable people never get really angry at events in the world (say, the treatment of blacks by the LAPD), or at the least they recognize that their anger is, in and of itself, evidence of "bias," and therefore they try "to see all sides of the issue." Since it is axiomatic that any disagreement requires two parties, there is always ready at hand a solid foundation for not falling into the quagmire of "bias" on either side. Following are two points in defense of this proposition:

First, let me refer to my statement that the Weekly was ahead of the Times in reporting on contra atrocities (letter-to-the-editor). I suggest that these atrocities should have engendered true outrage even among the sophisticated reporters and editors at the Times, and that every effort should have been made to report them and denounce them in the manner of the old "crusading newspaper." Instead we had "balance" from Richard Boudreaux in Nicaragua, meaning that his overall reporting gave the impression that the Sandinistas were somehow equally to blame for contra viciousness. (I consider Times editorializing on this issue to be strictly lightweight, even though it earned the Times an award from a major anti-intervention coalition in the area several years ago.)

On the basis of the difference between Boudreaux's reports on contra atrocities and the reports of the sources I mention in my letter, I deduced that the Times reports such distasteful material about Washington's friends and foes according to the following standard of "objectivity:" If Washington's foes commit ten human rights violations, and its friends committ 100 (or 1000), then you report ten of each. Thus are the scales of objectivity balanced exactly, and thereby can the charge of "bias" from such right-wing media critics as Reed Irvine be avoided. (Remember your own comment about the "defensiveness" of liberal reporters [and editors who once were reporters, of course]?)

Next let me recall my experience with one of the Times's foreign desk editors:

On the morning of May 14th, 1987, in a telephone conversation with a friend who is also a professional journalist, I learned of an attempt to frame American journalists and Costa Rica residents Tony Avirgan and his wife Martha Honey on a criminal rap. The mechanism was a clumsy "mail-order" drug plant, which appeared to have been set up by Costa Rican narcotics agents. The journalists had received a call that a package was waiting for them at the post office. When their secretary claimed it, she was immediately surrounded by Costa Rican police, and taken to a local judge, in whose

presence the package was opened.

The package was filled with cocaine, accompanied by a note signed "Tomas," from "Managua, Nicaragua." Tomas Borge is the only surviving founder of the Sandinista revolutionary party. The note also used cryptic terms and initials, believed to be an attempt to implicate a Christic investigator in the drug scam, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, and others. Later, six Costa Rican narcs went to the couple's house to "search" for more cocaine. None was found, and no charges were brought.

After hearing this account, I called the Times, to ask that Richard Boudreax be dispatched from Nicaragua to cover the story. I was given to a foreign desk editor with no little experience in Latin America, as I was to learn later. He listened patiently to my somewhat ardent suggestions that this was "news;" that with Costa Rican president Arias out of the country, Avirgan and Honey were very vulnerable; that they had received death threats as a result of their reports about Iran/contra figure John Hull; that we were not hearing enough about their work down there.

With only an interruption or two to correct my pronunciation ("Arias" is stressed on the first syllable), my handler heard me out. Then, in a fatherly voice containing just a trace of a chuckle, he said "You know that most of the journalists down there think that Avirgan and Honey are working for the Sandinistas, don't you?"

My immediate, (and, as I realized later, irrelevant,) response was to mention the vindication of the journalists by both the Costa Rican and U.S. judicial systems. (Hull sued Avirgan and Honey for liable, and lost) Then I asked him whether the alleged opinions of the "journalists down there" meant that Avirgan and Honey did not deserve attention, or that their reporting should be ignored. "No," he said, "I just thought you ought to know that." He did promise to call Richard Boudreax, however.

(This, too, is an example of "identification of a subject by reference to the opinions of others," here intended to educate a reader who obviously took Avirgan and Honey too seriously. Frankly, I consider this remark, made by an editor at one of America's most influential papers to someone concerned for the safety of American journalists, to be despicable. As I expected, not a word about the incident ever appeared in the Times.)

Even though I should have hung up, I continued the dialogue, asserting at one point that President Reagan was the primary obstacle to a successful Contadora-arranged peace plan for Central America.

Your editor again felt the need to instruct a Times reader whose emotions had clearly gotten the better of him. "Not necessarily so." he tells me. He then explained that he had recently attended a function at which a Guatemalan general said that Contadora would never work unless the Sandinistas reduced the size of their army.

Here we have "balance," an opinion contrary to mine, offered by someone independent of Washington, and coolly rational as well.

Your editor had a point, of course. The Guatemalan military cannot easily be accused of being in lock-step with Washington. When Congress imposed a suspension of military aid to Guatemala in retaliation for the worst human rights abuses in the hemisphere, the generals refused to knuckle under, deciding instead to get their weapons elsewhere rather than stop abusing the Guatemalan people.

Minimum competence guarantees that this Times staffer was aware that the Sandinistas had offered many times to negotiate a peace, which offers were dismissed out of hand by Reagan. Why couldn't he have said something like: "yes, many people believe that the president has sabotaged Contadora, and there often seems to be good evidence for it." Because, in fact, he was trying to con me.

If my experience with this man were an anomaly among the several conversations I have had with Times foreign desk editors, I would not assign it so much importance. While this example is the worst, it is of a piece with the others. Thus, considering too the Times's reporting on such items as the contras' heinous crimes, I have coined the term "sterile objectivity" to refer to its underlying bias.

Thank you for reading this far. I consider your viewpoint here to be very important, and I know that most of my friends and acquaintances who read the Times would agree with me. Thus, I think this topic is worth discussing in open forum. While I am not a professional journalist, I feel confident enough about my own viewpoint that I would be happy to participate in such a discussion with you. Maybe at a journalism class somewhere, or perhaps at a meeting with the FAIR people. (I can augment my credentials as a serious Times watcher with two longish tracts on the Times I wrote and distributed to friends and other media followers a few years ago. One of them includes the conversation I mention above; the other is an analysis of two articles by Richard Boudreax on democracy in Nicaragua that would have won a blue ribbon from the folks at the CIA.)

Or, let's do lunch. I work not far from the Times building, and it would be easy for me to arrange to meet you somewhere in the neighborhood. Let me know if you are interested.

Warmest regards,

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Bill Becker