

Chapter Five
**Discourse and Media Spectacle in the
Bush Administration:
A Cultural Studies Analysis**

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Since the rise of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham England in the 1960s, as well as in subsequent versions of cultural studies throughout the world, there has been a long-standing tradition of taking on the big issues of the era. The Birmingham School critically analyzed the assaults against working class culture by American and mass media culture. In this conjuncture, British cultural studies stressed the need for media literacy and critique, learning to read newspapers, TV news, advertisements, TV shows and the like just as one learns to read books (see Kellner 1995). The project helped generate a media literacy movement, expanded the concept of literacy, and introduced a new, powerful dimension of pedagogy into cultural studies.

Later, in the 1980s, British cultural studies took on the rise of Thatcherism and the emergence of a new rightwing conservative hegemony in Britain, by explaining how British culture, media, politics, and various economic factors led to the emergence of a new conservative hegemony (see Hall and Jacques 1983). Larry Grossberg (1992), Stanley Aronowitz (1993), myself (Kellner and Ryan 1988, Kellner 1991 and 1995), and others engaged in similar work within the U.S. during the Reagan era of the 1980s, applying cultural studies to analyze the big issues of the time.

Indeed, one of my major focuses of the past two decades has been the use of cultural studies and critical social theory to interrogate the big events of the time: The Persian Gulf TV War (Kellner 1992), Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election (Kellner 2001), From 9/11 to Terror War on the

September 11 terrorist attacks and their exploitation by the Bush administration to push through rightwing militarism, interventionism, unilateralism and a hard-right domestic agenda, including the Patriot Act (Kellner 2003b), and Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy (Kellner 2005), which demonstrated how the Bush administration consistently manipulated media spectacle during its first term and in the highly contested and controversial 2004 election. In my books *Media Culture* (Kellner 1995) and *Media Spectacle* (Kellner 2003a), I use cultural studies to critically interrogate major phenomena of the day like Reagan and Rambo, Madonna and pop feminism, rap and hip hop, cyberpunk and the Internet, McDonald's and globalization, Michael Jordan and the Nike spectacle, and other defining cultural phenomena of the era.

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach that can be used to address a wide range of cultural phenomena from advertising to political narratives (see Kellner 1995 and 2003). A multiperspectival and interdisciplinary enterprise, it draws on a number of disciplines to engage production and political economy of culture, critical engagement with texts, and audience research into effects. As a transdisciplinary enterprise, it has its own integrity as defined by the practices, methods, and work developing in its ever-expanding tradition. And it is counterdisciplinary, by refusing assimilation into standard academic disciplines, being open to a variety of methods and theoretical positions, and assuming a critical-oppositional stance to the current organization of the university, media, and society.

In this study, I will illustrate my approach to cultural studies by providing a critical reading of Bush administration discourse and politics, beginning with dissection of their politics of lying and use of media spectacle in the context of their Iraq intervention. I then analyze two media spectacles which undermined the credibility and power of the Bush administration — the Terri Schiavo deathwatch and Hurricane Katrina. To unpack the meaning and effects of these events, I suggest that a critical cultural studies which engages discourse, image, spectacle, and narrative embedded in key political events can help develop a critical theory of the contemporary moment. But in these analyses I argue for a multiperspectival cultural studies that draws on media studies, critical social theory, political analysis, and philosophy to unpack the multiplicity of meanings and effects in complex political phenomena like the Bush administration and their discourses and use of spectacle in Iraq, their intervention in conservative “right-to-life” politics as in the Terri Schiavo affair, and their massive failures in the Hurricane Katrina spectacle.

Lying in Politics: The Case of George W. Bush and Iraq

“Political Language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” George Orwell

As Paul Krugman has demonstrated in his New York Times columns and books (2001 and 2004), Bush administration economic policy has been based on “fuzzy math” and outright lying concerning deficit figures, about who would benefit from the giant tax cuts, concerning the effects of the tax breaks for the rich on job production and social services, and the impact on the federal deficit. President Bush said in 2002 that his tax cut would generate 800,000 jobs and repeatedly claimed that “everyone knows” that tax cuts create jobs. Yet major economists took out newspaper ads saying that this simply was not true, and following Bush’s initial statements another million jobs were lost, and unemployment and underemployment continued at near record levels into 2005, although there was a slight rise in 2006.

Moreover, it is by now well known and documented that Bush’s policy of launching a preemptive strike on Iraq was based on deception and lies. Bush and others in his administration constantly made false claims about alleged Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” and the threat that the Iraqis posed to the U.S. and the entire world. The failure to find such threatening weapons and media exposure of claims that U.S. and U.K. intelligence agencies were skeptical of these claims from the beginning have led to critical scrutiny of the case for war offered by the U.S. and Britain.

Robert Greenwald’s remarkable 2003 documentary *Uncovered* systematically demonstrates the mendacity and manipulation that characterized Bush administration discourse and policy over Iraq from the beginning. The documentary contrasts statements by members of the Bush administration including George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice, with statements by former members of the U.S. intelligence and political establishment demonstrating that Bush administration claims concerning alleged Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” were utterly bogus. In the documentary, former intelligence analysts also dissect Colin Powell’s address to the United Nations claiming to document Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction and show in detail how key facts and statistics Powell appealed to were simply false, his satellite imagery pictures claiming to present Iraqi weapons were appallingly misinterpreted, and his major claims concerning the immediate threat of Iraqi weapons were utterly false in what has to be the nadir of U.S.

diplomatic argumentation before an international audience.¹ The documentary presents as well critics such as former Ambassador Joseph Wilson convincingly arguing that Bush administration claims concerning ties between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime are completely unproven, a position affirmed by the official 9/11 Report.² In addition, it presents critics arguing that the Iraq occupation has created new terrorist enemies for the U.S. and has not made the U.S. safer, as Bush administration officials continually claim.³

In my books *Grand Theft 2000* (2001), *From 9/11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (2003), and *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (2005), I criticize “Bushspeak” as a mode of systematically engaging in the discourse of deception, manipulation, and lies. I document a wealth of Bush falsehoods in the 2000 and 2004 election campaign, the 36-Day Battle for the White House, fallacious claims about his economic policies, and other deception and lies on the economy, environment, energy policy, and foreign affairs. It has therefore been interesting to see best-selling books emerge by Al Franken with the title *Lies (And the Lying Liars Who Tell Them)* (2005) and by Joe Conason called *Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How it Distorts the Truth* (2003) with another book by David Corn on *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception* (2003), demonstrating Bush administration mendacity, followed by Frank Rich *The Greatest Story Ever Sold. The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (2006). In addition, Web-sites like www.spinsanity.com expose lies from all sides of the political spectrum, while MoveON.org has a web-site www.misleader.org, Bob Somerby has a web-site www.dailyhowler.com that for years has been attacking Bush administration lies and duplicity, while www.smirkingchimp.com; www.Bushwatch.com, and my own blogleft (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php>) have posited examples of Bush administration deception and lying throughout the Bush-Cheney Gang’s reign of deceit and deception.

Bushspeak: Big, Bold, and Brazen Lies

"If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually believe it." Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister

From the beginning, the Bush administration has practiced the Goebbels-Hitler strategy of the Big Lie,⁴ assuming that if you repeated a slogan or idea enough times the public would come to believe it, that words would become reality. For

years, the Republican Propaganda Ministry insisted that Bush was a “compassionate conservative,” that his tax breaks would help everyone, that Bush’s plan to privatize social security would save it, or that Iraq was a dangerous threat to U.S. national security and that invasion was necessary. Bushspeak involves continual repetition of simplistic slogans aimed to mobilize conservative support and without regard for truth.

Bold Lies involve knowing that you are lying and doing it anyway, boldly proclaiming whoppers that informed people know are lies, and in the face of facts, counterevidence, and arguments, continuing to intrepidly and resolutely repeat the untruth. Bush Bold Lies on Iraq include falsehoods such as the Bush administration did everything possible to avoid war and only attacked Iraq when it refused to let arms inspectors continue their work, that progress is being made in the Iraq war, or that we have to fight terrorism in Iraq or we’ll fight them at home.⁵ Such Bold Lies are repeated over and over until they take on the ring of truth, at least for the Bush base and those who cannot think critically about politics and the media.

But such was the chutzpah of the Bush administration that they could boldly lie to media reporters and pundits knowing that the media knew they were lying. Once Tucker Carlson of CNN recounted a surreal experience with Karen Hughes where she lied brazenly to him, knowing that he knew she was lying (Lauerman 2003). It is therefore a Brazen Lie when media figures know that the speaker is lying and he or she does it anyway, hoping to get away with it. By 2006, Bush administration justifications of their failed Iraq policy involved Brazen Lies since the media and public could see the catastrophic effects of the Iraq fiasco for themselves. To enforce Bold and Brazen Lies requires intimidation and retaliation against anyone who catches you in your lie and confronts you with the untruth that is spoken.

Conservative pundits are complicit in reproducing Bold and Brazen Lies because they are part of a Republican attack group that is willing to do and say anything to maintain power (see Brock 2004). Liberals and media types who see themselves as fair and objective are put in a troubling position when confronted with Bold and Brazen Lies. There are a number of reasons why lying comes so easily to the Bush-Cheney Gang. On one hand, there is a raw lust for power evident in Cheney, Rove, Bush, and others in the Bush administration by which the ends justify the means, and anything can be done or said to get elected and maintain power. Karl Rove and Dick Cheney perhaps best represent the raw, brutal power politics of the Bush administration in which telling lies constantly and systematically is justified by economic gain for the administration’s beneficiaries and the political power secured. Karl Rove, deemed by some a

“Mayberry Machiavellian” to denote the combination of his provincialism and utter ruthlessness (see Suskind 2004), seems to be driven by a fanatic love of power and money for himself and his Republican allies. Rove lies constantly, shamelessly, and aggressively because he knows that lies help gain his political ends. For Rove, winning is all and anything that helps him win is justified.

Dick Cheney also probably fits into the utterly amoral power politics camp, believing that the ends justify the means. Cheney’s audacious mendacity was clear the night of the 2004 Vice-Presidential debate with John Edwards when Cheney first denied that he had ever linked Al Qaeda and Iraq, and then falsely declared that he’d never seen John Edwards before that night. The former claim was, as everyone knew, a Brazen Lie, as Cheney had countless times insinuated and even asserted direct connections between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime, as an impressive array of news images and print clippings documented the next day, as did pictures showing him besides Edwards on earlier occasions. The episode revealed Cheney’s proclivity to simply say whatever he felt was politically expedient at the moment and to have zero respect for truth or even concern that he would get caught up in his lies, since truth and lying were of no interest to the power- and money-mad Cheney.

There is also the possibility that Cheney is so caught up in his ideological world that he can no longer tell the difference between truth and falsehood, fantasy and reality, and thus believes many of the lies that he articulates. Why, though, do Bush administration members lie so regularly and why does their base and others accept this? There are a range of elaborate theological and philosophical justifications for lying evident among certain sectors of the Bush cabal. The influence of the German philosopher Leo Strauss, who legitimated Plato’s “Noble Lie” as an important tool for ruling the ignorant masses, has been often cited.⁶ Strauss was also a devotee of Machiavelli, and his philosophy provided justification for the raw power politics and economic graft of the Bush administration. In a moment of candor, leading neocon Paul Wolfowitz (2003) admitted that the Bush administration pushed the issue of “weapons of mass destruction” to justify their Iraq war largely because manipulation of fear of Iraqi weapons was the best way to sell the Iraq policy to the public, suggesting that among Bush’s neocons a neo-Straussian proclivity to lie to justify policies that the ignorant masses cannot understand is operative.

The religious right, which makes up a significant segment of Bush administration core support, has an elaborate theological justification to legitimate lying. As Mark Miller suggests (2004, 279ff.), certain Christian fundamentalist groups that fervently support Bush take the biblical story of Rabab (Joshua 2, 1–24) to legitimate the principle of deception in a state of war.

For the Christian right, Bush represents the godly side in the war on terror as well as the multiple cultural wars at home; hence anything that he says or that is said on his behalf is justifiable as advancing the cause of good versus evil. Likewise, cult leader Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who owns the right-wing Washington Times and strongly supports the Bush family, preaches a doctrine “called Heavenly Deception. Religious recruits are told that the ‘non-Moon world’ is evil. It must be lied to so it can help Moon take over” (Brock 2004, p. 179).

The political genius of George W. Bush is that it is not certain that he is lying because he seems to believe many of the things that Cheney, Rove, Hughes, Rice, and his other handlers tell him. Often when he lies daily on the campaign or political trail, he is just repeating what he’s been told to say and may not even know it’s a lie. Seymour Hersh ends his book *Chain of Command* (2004) with reflections on Bush’s relation to truth and falsity: “There are many who believe George W. Bush is a liar, a President who knowingly and deliberately twists facts for political gain. But lying would indicate an understanding of what is desired, what is possible, and how best to get there. A more plausible explication is that words have no meaning for this President beyond the immediate moment, and so he believes that his mere utterances of the phrases make them real. It is a terrifying possibility” (367).⁷

Thus, whereas at one time conservatives were defenders of truth, and from the 1960s into the 1980s battled “relativists” and “postmodernists” in the academy and polity, curiously, conservatives are now systematic practitioners of the Big Lie — a point that John Dean makes in his book *Conservatives Without Conscience* (2006). When the Bush administration decided to attack Iraq, they committed themselves to the politics of mendacity. Several books make it clear that George W. Bush was highly interested in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein from the very beginning of his administration. Richard Clarke’s 2004 memoir *Against All Enemies* depicts Bush as obsessed with Saddam Hussein and Iraq from the beginning of his administration, a point confirmed by the Ron Suskind’s memoir of the White House experience of Bush’s fired Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill (2004). Bob Woodward’s *Plan of Attack* (2004) cites Bush’s religious fundamentalism and belief that he was doing God’s will in invading Iraq. Woodward’s book also indicates that the Bush administration had started doctoring intelligence in August 2002, shortly after the Downing Street Memo.⁸ Woodward documents how Cheney, Rice, and Bush began hyping threats from Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction,” insinuated links with Iraq and Al Qaeda, and pressured U.S. intelligence to find documentation of Iraqi weapons and reasons to go to war against Iraq.

Woodward's *State of Denial* exposed lies, flaws, and deeply dangerous failures of the Bush administration foreign policy and the utter incompetence and disarray in the White House. Woodward argued that key members of the Bush administration were in a "state of denial" about Iraq, and refused to tell the public the bad news that their intelligence services were reporting. Bush allegedly refused to use the word "insurgency" for years and administration officials have continuously failed to tell the truth about the mounting insurgency, increased violence and anarchy, and impossibility of a military factory in Iraq.

Woodward's recent book thus presented Iraq as a disaster that the Bush administration systematically lied about, and that showed Bush as a weak leader and his war cabinet as completely dysfunctional. In the words of Michiki Kakutani (2006): "In Bob Woodward's highly anticipated new book, 'State of Denial,' President Bush emerges as a passive impatient, sophomoric and intellectually incurious leader, presiding over a grossly dysfunctional war cabinet and given to an almost religious certainty that makes him disinclined to rethink or re-evaluate decisions he has made about the war" (See Kakutani 2006).

The Iraq invasion was also constructed and launched as a media spectacle, a process that I analyze in *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Kellner 2005), with its initial "shock and awe" bombing campaign and invasion, its pulling down the statue of Saddam Hussein, its bogus "Saving Private Jennifer" scenario, and the now laughable "Mission Accomplished" spectacle, whereby George W. Bush piloted a naval aircraft onto the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. In this carefully orchestrated media event, Bush emerged in full Top Gun regalia from a jet plane with "Navy One" and "George W. Bush, Commander-in-Chief" logos. Strutting out of the aircraft helmet in hand, Bush crossed the flight deck accompanied by a cheering crowd and with full TV coverage that had been anticipating the big event for hours. Delivering a canned speech from a podium with a giant banner "Mission Accomplished" behind him, Bush declared that the "major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed."⁹

Later, of course, ongoing catastrophe in Iraq caused a reversal of the spectacle and the Mission Accomplished media event is a revealing embarrassment for the Bush-Cheney administration. A critical cultural studies should engage the words and images, the discourses and spectacle, that constitute major political events from elections to wars to crucial episodes in the ongoing political struggles of the day. In this section that focused on the politics of lying, I have taken the Bush administration to task for its Big, Bold, and Brazen Lies. As the history of recent totalitarian regimes demonstrates,

systematic deception and lying rots the very fabric of a political society, and if U.S. democracy is to find new life and a vigorous future there must be public commitments to truth and public rejection of the politics of lying.

In the next section I will indicate how rightwing politico-religious discourse entered into the Terri Schiavo spectacle, but how the spectacle turned against the Bush administration and its allies in ways to undercut their power, a process I will engage in a similar fashion in the analysis in the following section on Hurricane Katrina that appears in retrospect as one of the crucial forces in undermining the Bush-Cheney administration.

The Media and Death: The Case of Terri Schiavo and the Pope

"During the period this spring when the spectral presence called "Terri" dominated the national discourse, such areas of confusion between what was known and not known and merely assumed or repeated went largely unremarked upon." Joan Didion, 2005.

Just as a critical cultural studies should confront the big political issues and struggles of the day, so too just it engage the intersection between religion, politics, and the media. Curiously, the best-known representatives of cultural studies have tended to ignore religion and so to help compensate for this omission, I will engage in this section the conjunction between the death of Terri Schiavo and the Pope, and the ways that the former's death became a site of struggle over religion, whereas the Pope's death became an opportunity for a triumphal display of Catholicism.

Usually death is an extremely private and intimate affair, taboo to scrutiny by the broadcast media. To be sure, television pays homage to the death of important figures, especially those in the entertainment industry, that gives it an opportunity for self-promotion. But rarely before March 2005 did television go on a death watch and trace intimate medical, personal, and social details of an individual person's final days and death until the very opposite cases of Terri Schiavo and the Pope.¹⁰

For fifteen years, Schiavo had been in a deep coma following a stroke, and after much litigation between the husband and the family, doctors and the courts agreed that Terri had no chance of recovery, was in a "persistently vegetative state" with severe brain damage, and that her husband had the right to take her off of life-support systems according to her stated expression that she would not

want to live hooked up to machines. Schiavo's family battled the husband and twice got the courts and in 2003 Jeb Bush to return her to feeding-tube machines after judicial decisions ruled that she could be taken off.¹¹

When the Florida judiciary ruled on February 25, 2005 that Schiavo could be taken off of life support, once again her parents appealed and after being turned down by all courts up to the Supremes, Congress passed an emergency bill that would allow Schiavo's parents to petition the federal courts to reinstate her feeding tube, and George W. Bush rushed back to Washington from vacation on his Texas ranch to sign the bill. This extraordinary measure in effect asserted the authority of the state over private affairs such as medical care and decisions about life and death, as well as putting the federal government over the judiciary.

But the courts again immediately ruled against this intervention, including the Supreme Court that denied the parents' appeal, judging that Florida law dictated that the appropriate court had ruled in support of the husband's right to terminate his wife in accordance with her wishes. The hypocrisy of George W. Bush and the Republican establishment on the Terri Schiavo case was truly incredible: although he claims to be "pro-life," Bush carried out a record 152 executions when Governor of Texas, barely bothering to review the cases because he "trusted the courts." He signed a bill as Texas Governor in 1999 that gave hospitals the right to pre-emptively take patients off of life-support systems when they could not pay their bills.¹² Further, the former Texas Congressman Tom Delay who was most militant in attacking the courts and assailing the "murder" of Terri Schiavo had pulled the plug on his own father when he was seriously injured and faced a life on a medical-support machine.¹³

Although the Schiavo case was probably the most reviewed case in recent history by doctors and the courts, the Republican right and their Christian evangelical allies jumped in to exploit the issue with many fanatic "right to life" advocates spreading false medical information, defaming the husband carrying out his wife's wishes, and creating a quasi-fascist mob scene, fuelled by intense media coverage, that caused multiple threats against the husband's life and the judge who ruled in his favor. On Fox television, there were fake medical experts who said that they had personally observed "life" in Schiavo and that she had responded to her parents; the Senate majority leader, medical doctor Bill Frist, declared that upon watching a video tape he was convinced she was conscious and might recover; an assorted array of ideologues and quacks were marched out to the approving Fox news hosts, including psychic John Edwards whose TV show had failed, intoning that Schiavo was conscious, did not want to be taken off of life support, and that doing so was murder; and her parents claimed that Terri had communicated to them "I want to live."

The dissemination of pure falsehoods about the Terri Schiavo case provides another example of how the rightwing and their media apparatus spread untruths with impunity in a new post-factual situation. Another bevy of commentators vilified the husband who ordered the termination of her life-support system and judges who ruled that this was his legal right and the rational thing to do after the intense medical scrutiny and multiple court hearings.¹⁴ As critic Sam Parry indicated, it was truly frightening to see the rightwing media machine on cable television, Talk Radio, the Internet, and the press use the Schiavo case to push their rightwing antiabortion and anti-right to die “Culture of Life” agenda, while attacking “liberal” judges, politicians, and values.¹⁵ The case showed the power of the right to dominate the media agenda and relentlessly use it to promote its agenda.

But polls indicated that up to 80% of those queried reacted against the Republican intervention and Bush’s approval record dropped a record seven points in one week to 45% and the Republican establishment backed off of the case. This example provides another case of what I call reversal of the spectacle where a media spectacle concocted to push through a specific agenda flip-flops into its opposite as did the rightwing attempt to impeach Bill Clinton, or Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” spectacle to prematurely declare victory in Iraq.¹⁶ Of course, the spectacle itself is always subject to contestation and reversal and in the long-run the right may well be able to exploit the Terri Schiavo case to promote its “Culture of Life” agenda, but at the time of her death there was clearly a backlash against rightwing extremism and attempts of the religious right and Bush administration to exploit the case to promote their agenda.

Yet while reaction against the rightwing mob and Bush manipulation of crucial matters of life and death has been encouraging, the wave of irrationalism, hypocrisy, mob thuggery, and constant noise of the rightwing Republican media echo chamber has been highly disturbing. The spectacle of Schiavo slowly dying was extremely gruesome and macabre, while the constant media exposure of this event showed the ghoulish extremes that the media would go to in order to attract audiences and the ways that small groups of rightwing fanatics are able to drive the media agenda.

While dying is the most personal of all individual and family events, and people caught up in the drama should have their privacy, the media spectacle relentlessly focused on every twist and turn of the Schiavo case, at the same time when the Pope was in a terminal condition and the media also engaged in an intense death watch over his condition until his death shortly after Schiavo died on March 31.

Although the Terri Schiavo spectacle was horrific, it had the positive consequences of raising important issues of life and death, including what constitutes a life worth living, what are the conditions of a dignified death, how does one deal with intense suffering and hopeless medical conditions, and who has power over life and death decisions. Many people reflected on these issues and were educated on the importance of families and doctors discussing the need for a living will to document one's personal decision. Yet crucial issues of life and death were rarely debated on network television and the gruesome Terri Schiavo spectacle showed the corporate media at their worst sending hordes of reporters on a death watch in Florida after the courts ruled that she should be taken off life-support systems. Until her death at the end of March, there were hours of daily coverage of the ordeal and numerous pictures of the poor woman on life support, being visited by her parents who were complicit in the media spectacle, and allied with rightwing extremists like antiabortion activist Randall Terry who was an official spokesperson for the family. Randall Terry had for years threatened women going into clinics getting abortions, organized mobs to picket and sometimes assault abortion clinics and doctors. This extremist had been frequently arrested and jailed for his fanaticism, his followers had bombed and burned abortion clinics and killed doctors who performed abortion and yet there he was, everyday on mainstream television, spouting his extremist views and exploiting the grief of a tragic case of a young woman dying.¹⁷

In fact, there were only a small number of protestors actually at the hospice where Schiavo was dying, but the media intensely focused on the demonstrations and privileged the voices and messages of the demonstrators and Schiavo family. Protests, by contrast, during the same period against Bush administration Iraq policies were ignored by the mainstream media. Corporate television also failed to note that many of the same rightwing extremists, who railed against "judicially-sanctioned murders" and denied the hard fought struggles for a right to end one's life with dignity and according to conditions of one's own choosing, does not care about state executions, the killing of 100,000s of civilians in Iraq,¹⁸ or other government-sponsored torture and murder. Yet the corporate media and rightwing Republic noise machine went into hysteria over a poor hopelessly vegetative and dying woman and continued to threaten those who sanctioned the act, with Tom DeLay railing that "the time will come for the men responsible for this to answer for their behavior."

The invasion of Terri Schiavo's privacy and dignity by the rapacious media and exploitative politicians was astonishing. While there was a gender issue involved in the case with the old Southern ideology of saving innocent white girls from vile forces, male politicians and the media were exploiting Schiavo

for their own ends. Tom DeLay and rightwing Congressman debated summoning Schiavo to Washington and bringing her to Congress to “save” her from the doctors and the courts. There were reports that Jeb Bush had ordered Florida state troopers to seize her and carry her away a la Elian Gonzalez, but that this had been prevented by local law enforcement officials who refused them entry.¹⁹ It’s also symptomatic that in his intervention in the case, George W. Bush said that the government should help the weakest and least powerful members of society. This is highly paternalistic, as it advocates acting on behalf of the “victim,” rather than empowering the oppressed and is also hypocritical since the Bush administration has cut back in its budget on programs that help the poor, children, the elderly, women, and various oppressed groups.

Thus the highly personal and complex question of rights for life and death were hi-jacked by extremist and opportunistic politicians who poisoned a serious debate with their venom and hypocrisy since DeLay had ordered the termination of his own father’s life and Bush had signed a bill legislating that the state could take patients off of life support systems if you could not pay for further life support (this is state-sanctioned murder!). The media allowed rightwing extremists to define the terms of debate and to advocate their fanatic positions, making a vulgar spectacle of the whole sad affair.

While the Schiavo deathwatch was gruesome and exploitative, the Pope’s death was presented by the mainstream media as ennobling and celebratory, in the most sustained advertisement for conservative Catholic religious ideology in memory. The Pope’s decision to leave the hospital for his Papal Chambers was praised as a choice of a dignified death of his own choosing. During his last days, every medical announcement was accompanied by a theological message: the Pope was greatly suffering, as Jesus did; the suffering Pope was pleased to hear read documents of the stages of Christ’s Passion, thus equating the Pope with Jesus, as Catholic doctrine propagated; a Vatican spokesman announced that the “Pope’s faith is so strong and full, and the experience of God so intensively lived, that he, in these hours of suffering already sees and already touches Christ”; and just before John Paul II died, the Vatican announced that the Pope was serene in the face of death knowing that he was soon going to join his Heavenly Father, propagating the Christian myth of the afterlife. Finally, when he died on April 2, 2005, the Pope was said to have exhibited great courage in the face of death and showed how to die a good death, having served his Church faithfully, he was ready to pass on with dignity to the next stage.

The Pope’s death was a major media spectacle and great P.R. for a beleaguered and declining Catholic Church. Thousands rushed into Vatican Square to mourn the Pope’s death and celebrate his life. The U.S. TV networks

had their anchors and top reporters on the scene and ran repeatedly prepared footage on the Pope's exemplary life. Catholic officials were interviewed in-depth on the Pope's life and significance, and ordinary people were brought on camera to testify of their love for the Pope.

On his Sunday morning ABC Talk show, George Stephanopoulos intoned that John Paul was "the most famous Pope the world has ever seen" and many programs featured George W. Bush's praise of the Pope as a champion of the "march of freedom" and "Word of God," covertly identifying the Pope with his own self-image. On CBS's 60 Minutes there were homages to the Pope and one official said that only two Popes, Leo and Gregory in the fifth and sixth centuries, were deemed "the Great" and that there was talk of bestowing this honor on Pope John Paul; many programs discussed the probability of a fast-track to Sainthood for the deceased Pope. There were repeated references on all the networks concerning the great "charisma" of Pope John Paul, but the accompanying footage showed him tonelessly reading precanned speeches in a barely understandable English and I rarely saw any TV footage of John Paul speaking spontaneously. But despite the absence of confirming TV footage, commentators repeatedly extolled John Paul's eloquence, charisma, and greatness.

Hence, just as rightwing religious extremists used the mainstream corporate media to promote their "Culture of Life" ideology during the Terri Schiavo affair, so too did the media allow the Catholic Church to promote a conservative version of its theology and elevate its spokesperson to Divinity and Greatness. Although George Stephanopoulos had the temerity to question Boston archbishop Cardinal Bernard Law concerning whether or not the Pope was quick and decisive enough concerning the Church sexual abuse scandal, Cardinal Law quickly brushed off the question and few commentators raised the embarrassing issue in their discussions of John Paul's Papacy.²⁰ Likewise, while there were copious references to his theological conservatism and general anti-modernity stance, there were few discussions of how many Catholics neglected his teaching on the prohibition of birth control and abortion, his polemics against homosexuality, or the role of women in the Church.²¹

On the other hand, while there was much praise of Pope John Paul's admirable concern for the oppressed and marginalized, poverty, and world peace, there was little on his strong opposition to the death penalty or his principled opposition to Bush Senior and Junior's Iraq interventions. In fact, the term "culture of life" was introduced by Pope John Paul II in a 1995 text "The Gospel of Life" which included polemics against capital punishment, gun culture, and war, as well as against abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and

genetic engineering of humans. The Bush administration and religious right have appropriated the latter part of John Paul's teaching, but not the first part that conflicts with their rightwing political agenda.

Bush's conservative project was to enlist Catholic support in alliance with part of the Pope's agenda and he used the notion "culture of life" as a political mantra to appeal to Catholics as well his evangelical Christian base. It worked in the 2004 election as Bush received 54% of the Catholic vote, the first time that a majority of Catholics voted against Democrats and a Catholic candidate. The mainstream corporate media aided the Bush agenda in the Schiavo spectacle and presentation of the Pope's last days, death, and funeral by failing to note contradictions between John Paul's concept of the "culture of life" and the Bush administration and U.S. conservative position. Thus, both the Schiavo and Pope's death coverage were driven by the ideological conservatism that has been the hegemonic discourse of the corporate media, especially television during the Bush administration.

As the Cardinals convened to choose the next Pope, the media spectacle once again focused on the Vatican with intense speculation over who would be John Paul's successor. On the second day, there was tremendous excitement as smoke arose from the Vatican, but, comically, many of the live media commentators, such as Charlie Gibson of ABC, read it incorrectly as black smoke signifying that no choice had been made. When Vatican bells began ringing, it was clear a new Pope had been chosen and the world focused on the news that a German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a conservative hard-liner and close associate of Pope John Paul had been chosen.

While TV commentators babbled on uncritically, the print media was not so subservient. The London Sun headlined: "From Hitler Youth to . . . PAPA RATZI," while the Daily Telegraph headlined "'God's Rottweiler' is the New Pope." Many newspapers contained critical analysis of his hard-line conservative approach and role as Vatican Enforcer of the most reactionary doctrine over the past years and the number of enemies he had made.²²

One of the shocking revelations that soon came out was that during the highly contested and close 2004 U.S. presidential election, "then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote a letter to U.S. bishops while the campaign was in progress, instructing them to deny Communion to any Catholic candidate unwilling to criminalize abortion. Ratzinger's letter did not win anything close to unanimous agreement, even among the American bishops, yet he succeeded in creating a public question about John Kerry's status as a Roman Catholic. The shift among Catholic voters in 2004 was small in absolute numbers — President Bush increased his support among Catholics by 6 points from 2000 to 2004 —

yet, according to one analyst, it was large enough to turn the election in Ohio, Iowa and New Mexico. Arguably, then, Ratzinger won the election for Bush."²³

The Bush-Cheney election team had systematically appealed to conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants to promote their "Culture of Life" agenda and the Vatican and mainstream corporate media had aided and abetted their strategy. It remains to be seen whether the reaction against the Republican exploitation of the Terri Schiavo case will undermine support for the Bush-Cheney administration or whether an Unholy Alliance between rightwing evangelical and Catholic religion, the Republican Party, and the corporate media will continue to be a dominant powers of the contemporary era.

Hurricane Spectacles and the Crisis of the Bush Presidency

"For the first 120 hours after Hurricane Katrina, TV journalists were let off their leashes by their mogul owners, the result of a rare conjoining of flawless timing (summer's biggest vacation week) and foulest tragedy (America's worst natural disaster). All of a sudden, broadcasters narrated disturbing images of the poor, the minority, the aged, the sick and the dead, and discussed complex issues like poverty, race, class, infirmity and ecology that never make it on the air in this swift-boat/anti-gay-marriage/Michael Jackson media-sideshow era. So began a perfect storm of controversy." Nikki Finke, LA Weekly media commentator, 2005

In retrospect, the Terri Schiavo spectacle followed by the Hurricane Katrina helped raise questions about the Bush-Cheney administration that led to a dramatic decline in their popular support, leading to a devastating defeat for the Republican Party in the 2006 Congressional elections. In this section, I will show how the Hurricane Katrina media spectacle raised questions about the Bush administration, how they tried to create their own spectacle, and how they continually failed.

On the weekend of August 27-28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hurtled toward the Louisiana coast. With winds up to 175 miles per hour it was deemed a Hurricane 5, the most dangerous on the Saffir-Simpson scale. The media had been warning that a big hurricane was going to strike the Gulf coast and was heading straight for New Orleans for days prior to its eventual landing on Monday, August 29. Reports had focused on the potentially catastrophic threats to New Orleans, noting how much of the city was perilously below sea-level and

how flooding threatened its precarious levee and canal system that protected the city from potential catastrophe. There were copious media speculations that this could be “the big one,” prophesized for years and documented in government and media reports, warning that New Orleans could be devastated by a major hurricane. Accordingly, the mayor of New Orleans and state officials had ordered the city evacuated, while the Governor of Louisiana declared a “state of emergency,” putting the federal government in charge.²⁴

Despite all the warnings, there appeared to be utterly inadequate preparation in the days preceding the well-forecast hurricane and for days after it was apparent that this was indeed a major catastrophe. Although the New Orleans mayor ordered evacuation just before the storm was to hit, tens of thousands, mostly poor and black people, remained behind because they had no transportation or funds to leave the city. Tens of thousands of the remaining citizens were herded into the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center to ride out the storm, without proper food and water, sanitary facilities, police protection, or other basic necessities. Although the crowds survived the storm, which did not strike New Orleans directly, and while the storm was weaker than initially predicted, Hurricane Katrina inflicted tremendous damage when on Monday September 29 the 17th Street Canal levee was breached, others cracked, and 80-90% of the city lay under water (Brinkley 2006).

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath exhibited one of the most astonishing media spectacles in U.S. history. Houses and towns along the Gulf coast in Louisiana and Mississippi were destroyed and flood surges wreaked havoc miles inland. New Orleans was buried in water and for several days, the crowds in the Superdome and Convention Center were not given food, water, or evacuation and there were reports of fighting, rape, robbery, and death, some exaggerated as we shall see below. Indeed, no federal or state troops were sent to the city in the early days of the disaster, and thousands were trapped in their homes as the flood waters rose and there were widespread images of looting and crime.

Just as President Bush remained transfixed reading “My Pet Goat” to a Florida audience of schoolchildren after 9/11, a spectacle preserved on the Internet and memorialized by Michael Moore in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) so too was the president invisible in the aftermath of Katrina (as he had been after the Asian Tsunami). Bush remained on a five-week vacation during the first days of the disaster punctuated by a visit to a private event in Arizona where he bragged about how well things were going in Iraq, comparing the war there that he initiated to World War II, inferring that he was FDR. The next day Bush was shown clowning at a fundraiser in San Diego, smiling and strumming a guitar,

and again bragging about Iraq and touting his failed domestic policies, leading commentator David Jenkins (2005) to exclaim:

The last few weeks have been irrefutable proof that America is being wrecked and mismanaged by the most incompetent, dangerous and out of touch boobs ever to obtain power. Any American with even a tiny amount of conscience who watched those images from New Orleans shook their heads with disbelief and shame that something like this should happen within our own borders in these modern times. As pictures of floating corpses glared at us through our TV sets, we were treated to photo-ops of our supposed leader golfing, blithering about Social Security, eating cake and strumming a guitar. Meanwhile, our Secretary of State [Rice] shopped for shoes and took in a show while the Vice President [Cheney] shopped for a house in a ritzy Maryland neighborhood.

During Bush's first visit to the disaster area, he made inappropriate jokes about how he knew New Orleans during his party days all too well and bantered that he hoped to visit Republican Senator Trent Lott's new house upon hearing that his beachfront estate was destroyed. In a fateful comment, Bush told his hapless FEMA director Michael Brown on camera: "You are doing a heck of a job, Brownie." Bush's first visit to the area kept him away from New Orleans and isolated from angry people who would confront him. His visit to the heavily damaged city of Biloxi, Mississippi was preceded by a team that cleared rubble and corpses from the route that the president would take, leaving the rest of the city in ruin. The same day, in an interview with Diane Sawyer, Bush remarked "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees" at a time when the media had circulated copious reports of previous warnings by scientists, journalists, and government officials concerning dangers of the levees breaching and catastrophic flooding in the city of New Orleans, much of which was dangerously below sea level.

Bush's response to the catastrophe revealed all the weaknesses of the Bush presidency: immature frat-boy, good-old boy behavior and banter; political cronyism; a bubble of isolation surrounded by sycophantic advisors; an arrogant out-of-touchness with the realities of the sufferings his policies had unleashed; a general incompetence; and belief that image-making can compensate for the lack of public policy.

But the media spectacle of the hurricane, which dominated the U.S. cable news channels for days and was heavily covered on the U.S. network news, showed images of unbelievable suffering and destruction, depicting thousands of people without food and water, and images of unimaginable loss and death in a

city that had descended into anarchy and looked like a Third World disaster area with no relief in sight.

The spectacle of the poor, sick, and largely black population left behind provided rare media images of what Michael Harrington (1963) described as “the other America,” and the media engaged in rare serious discussions of race and class as they tried to describe and make sense of the disaster. As John Powers (2005) put it: “Suddenly, the Others were right in front of our noses, and the major media — predominantly white and pretty well-off — were talking about race and class. Newspapers ran front-page articles noting that nearly six million people have fallen into poverty since President Bush took office — a nifty 20 percent increase to accompany the greatest tax cuts in world history. Feisty columnists rightly fulminated that, even as tens of thousands suffered in hellish conditions, the buses first rescued people inside the Hyatt Hotel. Of course, such bigotry was already inscribed in the very layout of New Orleans. One reason the Superdome became a de facto island is that, like the city’s prosperous business district, it was carefully constructed so it would be easy to protect from the disenfranchised (30 percent of New Orleans lives below the poverty line).”

Usually the media exaggerate the danger of hurricanes, put their talking heads on the scene, and then exploit human suffering by showing images of destruction and death. While there was an exploitative dimension to the Katrina coverage, it was clear that this was a major story and disaster, and media figures and crews risked their lives to cover the story. Moreover, many reporters and TV commentators were genuinely indignant when federal relief failed to come day after day, and for the first time in recent memory seriously criticized the Bush administration and Bush himself, while sharply questioning officials of the administration when they tried to minimize the damage or deflect blame. As Mick Farren (2005) put it:

In the disaster that was New Orleans, TV news and Harry Connick were the first responders. It may well have been a news generation’s finest hour. Reporters who had been spun or embedded for most of their careers faced towering disaster and intimacy with death, and told the tale with a horrified honesty. When anchors like Brian Williams and Anderson Cooper waded in the water, dirty and soaked in sweat, it transcended showboating. It was the story getting out. Okay, so Geraldo Rivera made an asshole of himself, but I will never forget the eloquent shell shock of NBC cameraman Tony Zumbado after he discovered the horror at the Convention Center.

That CNN could function where FEMA feared to tread undercut most federal excuses and potential perjuries. Journalists who could see the bodies

refused to accept “factuality” from Michael Brown, Michael Chertoff, or even George Bush. Ted Koppel and Paula Zahn all but screamed “bullshit!” at them on camera.

The rightwing Republican attack machine first blamed the New Orleans poor for not leaving and then descending into barbarism, but it came out quickly that there were tens of thousands who were so poor they had no transportation, money, or anyplace to go, and many had to care for sick and infirm friends, relatives, or beloved pets. Moreover, the poor were abandoned for days without any food, water, or public assistance. The rightwing attack machine then targeted local officials for the crisis, but intense media focus soon attached major blame for the criminally inadequate public response on Bush administration FEMA Director Michael Brown. It was revealed that Brown, who had no real experience with disaster management, had received his job because he was college roommate of Joe Allbaugh, the first FEMA director and one of the major Texas architects of Bush’s election successes, known as the “enforcer” because of his fierce loyalty to Bush and tough Texas behavior and demeanor (Benjamin 2005a).²⁵

Stories circulated about how Allbaugh gutted FEMA of disaster response professionals and packed it with political appointees, such as previous Bush team PR and media people. Joe Allbaugh was part of Bush’s anti-government conservative coalition which cut back funding for FEMA, as the administration would later cut back plans to prepare disaster relief for New Orleans and cut federal funds to boost up its levee system. Allbaugh was FEMA director when 9/11 hit and quickly resigned, going into the public sector to advise corporations on how to deal with terrorism and then set up a business helping corporations get contracts in Iraq and security to protect their employees.

Meanwhile, Internet sources and Time magazine revealed that Brown had fudged his vita, claiming in testimony to Congress that he had been a manager of local emergency services when he had only had a low-level position (Benjamin 2005b). He had claimed he was a professor at a college where he was a student and generally had padded his c.v. Stories also circulated that in his previous job he had helped run Arabian horse shows, but had been dismissed for incompetence. After these reports, it was a matter of time until Bush first sent him back to Washington, relieving him of his duties, and allowing him to resign a couple of days later.

The media then had a field day scapegoating the hapless Brown who admittedly was a poster boy for Bush administration incompetent political appointees. But the top echelons of FEMA were full of Bush appointees who had fumbled and stumbled during the first crucial days of disaster relief and who

were unqualified to deal with the tremendous challenges confronting the country. Moreover, Brown was castigated in the media for a statement that he did not know there were tens of thousands of people left behind stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center without food, water, or protection after pictures of their plight had circulated through the media, while Michael Chertoff, head of the cabinet level Department of Homeland Security, also made such statements, and the federal non-response could easily be blamed on his ineptness and failure to coordinate disaster response efforts (Landey et al 2005).²⁶

Media images of the thousands left on their own in New Orleans and the surrounding area were largely poor and black, leading to charges that the Bush administration were blind to the suffering of the poor and people of color.²⁷ Revealingly, these individuals were referred to as “refugees” and indeed they appeared homeless and devastated, as in familiar images of people escaping devastation in the developing world, although this time it was happening domestically.

While there was a fierce debate as to whether the federal response would or would not have been more vigorous if the victims were largely white or middle class people, readers of Yahoo news recognized that racism was blatantly obvious in captions to two pictures circulating, one of whites wading through water and described as “carrying food,” while another picture showing blacks with armloads of food described as “looters.” During NBC’s Concert for Hurricane Relief, rapper Kanye West declared “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” and asserted that America is set up “to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible.” West sharply criticized Bush’s domestic priorities and Iraq policy before NBC was able to cut away to a smiling Chris Tucker.²⁸

Although Laura Bush and conservatives claimed that charges of racism were “ridiculous” and offensive, it was clear to many that there were serious issues of class and race concerning who was left behind without resources to evacuate and which neighborhoods were more vulnerable to devastation. Later, serious questions were raised concerning relative strengths of floodwalls in various regions of town and why poorer neighborhoods tended to be devastated by flood waters (Davis and Fontenot 2005).

Bush himself, ever in denial, told Diane Sawyer in a Good Morning America interview that: “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees”—an inane response reduced to a blatant lie when later videotape showed a FEMA authority warning Bush that the levees could breach and the city could be flooded. Bush’s mother Barbara also put on display the famous Bush family insensitivity when she said on a visit to evacuees in Houston’s Astrodome: “So

many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

Bush administration operatives deplored critics playing “the blame game,” showing once again how one of the defining features of Bushspeak is to deny and refuse to take responsibility for failures of his administration.²⁹ Bush’s presidential ratings continued to plunge as day after day there were pictures of incredible suffering, devastation, and death, and discussions of the utterly inadequate federal, local, and state response. While the U.S. corporate media had failed to critically discuss the failings of George W. Bush in either the 2000 or 2004 elections and had white-washed his failed presidency, for the first time one saw sustained criticism of the Bush administration on the U.S. cable TV news networks. The network correspondents on the ground were appalled by the magnitude of the devastation and paucity of the federal response and presented images of the horrific spectacle day after day, including voices from the area critical of the Bush administration. Even media correspondents who had been completely supportive of Bush’s policies began to express doubts and intense public interest in the tragedy ensured maximum coverage and continued critical discussion.

The Bush administration went on an offensive, sending Bush, Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld, and other high officials to the disaster area, but the stark spectacle of suffering undercut whatever rhetoric the Bush team produced. Vice President Dick Cheney was reportedly hunting in Montana and then shopping for a \$2.5 million vacation house on the Maryland shore when the hurricane hit. It was widely reported that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was on a shopping spree in New York buying \$5000 plus pairs of shoes when the spectacle unfolded on TV, and her first press conference during the disaster showed her giddy and bubbly, impervious to the suffering; to improve her image, she was sent to her home-state Alabama where photographers dutifully snapped her helping organize relief packages for flood victims.

Whereas the Bush administration tried to emphasize positive features of the relief effort, the images of continued devastation and the slow initial response undercut efforts to convey an image that the Bushites were in charge and dealing with the problem. Although the Bush team tried to scapegoat the poor, local officials, environmental groups, and even God,³⁰ it was clear that only the federal government had the resources to deal with the immensity of the tragedy and that the Bush administration had largely failed.

Bush’s claim that he would himself lead an investigation into what went wrong with the federal response to Katrina was met by ridicule,³¹ and although the Democrats attempted to mandate an independent government commission to

investigate the failure, Republicans resisted and formed a committee of their own to investigate that Democrats refused to participate in.

Karl Rove was reportedly put in charge of both the White House PR effort and reconstruction efforts,³² and suddenly Bush was sent down to the disaster area every few days to make an appearance, hugging black people and showing that he cared and was in charge. Of course, these media visits were pseudo-events constructed to make Bush look presidential. NBC anchor Brian Williams's reported on his blog how he and the residents of New Orleans were plunged in darkness during one presidential visit, when suddenly all the electricity came on and everyone cheered and rejoiced. After Bush's motorcade passed through to celebratory applause, electricity was suddenly cut, not to be restored, causing groans and dismissals of the president who found the political will to have electricity for his safe passage and stagecraft, but not for those still stuck in the city. Another visit showed Bush in Mississippi with shirt-sleeves rolled up, speaking to a man who seemed dazed and lost, wanting to know where he could find a Red Cross station which he had been searching for days. A decisive Bush pointed down the road, declaring "there's one right down there," appearing to be on top of the situation. However, it was later reported that the man never made it to that station because it was just a theater prop and that false "Red Cross stations" were popping up all over the South during Bush's visits, only to disappear the moment the camera left. His "visits" also diverted military and relief efforts to set creation instead of emergency assistance.

Three weeks after Katrina, Bush imagineers concocted a staged spectacle to attempt to make Bush look like a decisive leader. In an evening prime-time address to the nation, Bush was shown striding across the fabled Jackson Square in New Orleans with blue-background lighting and the famed St. Louis Cathedral in the background. The White House had brought generators to produce electricity for the shoot in the blacked out city, and had put up background patches of military camouflage netting to hide the president from the ghostly deserted streets of the French Quarter. But the long shot of Bush walking up to the podium made him look more like a small figure in an Antonioni movie, dwarfed by the environment, and critics dammed the speech as failed stagecraft.

This was typical Bush administration image making: stagecraft over substance, and carefully planned spectacle to attempt to produce an image of Bush as a decisive leader. But the previous three weeks had shown that Bush was not a leader at all, but a front man for a regime based on cronyism, providing spoils from the treasury and government patronage jobs to their supporters and loyalists. Michael Brown of FEMA had been unveiled as totally

unqualified for the job and had received it only because he was the roommate of Joe Allbaugh, who himself had dismantled FEMA and filled it with incompetent political appointees.

The Bush administration has combined cronyism with cutting back federal government programs and funding for public works that help people. Bush's tax cuts for the rich, attempts to privatize social security, and cut backs on environmental and government regulation, constitute an attack on a liberal conception of government itself. Allowing unrestricted economic development in the Gulf coast, cutting back on funds to shore up protection against flooding, and trimming government agencies to deal with crisis, exhibit the Bush administration's anti-government bias—and its dangers. For Katrina showed that in time of major emergencies and facing serious problems, the federal government has the most resources to deal with problems and if it is undermined the country is weakened and its very national security is threatened.

Not only did the FEMA fiasco reveal how Bush had put political hacks and rightwing ideologues throughout government and carry out an assault on government itself, but it revealed his personal failings and those of his administration's policies and ideology as well. As Frank Rich put it: "The worst storm in our history proved perfect for exposing this president because in one big blast it illuminated all his failings: the rampant cronyism, the empty sloganeering of "compassionate conservatism," the lack of concern for the "underprivileged" his mother condescended to at the Astrodome, the reckless lack of planning for all government operations except tax cuts, the use of spin and photo-ops to camouflage failure and to substitute for action" (Rich 2005).

Some speculated that the Katrina catastrophe and the failed Bush administration response signaled the death knell of the pro-market laissez-faire politics that had dominated the U.S. for the past years. It was clear that global warming had contributed to the intensity of the hurricanes and other extreme weather that had been plaguing the world for the past several years. While there was a fierce debate whether global warming or cyclical hurricane patterns were the major cause of the extreme weather, it is likely that both are to blame (see McCarthy 2005). The Bush administration's dismissal of the science of global warming and blocking efforts to deal with the problem now appear criminally negligent. In addition, the deregulation that characterized neoliberal politics had been responsible for destruction of the wetlands, which traditionally helped buffet hurricanes and extreme weather, as well as uncontrolled coastal development along the Gulf Coast which contributed to the immensity of the destruction.

The Bush administration response, led by Karl Rove, trumpeted out the same old neoliberal policies and made it highly likely that there would be major corruption and political cronyism in Gulf redevelopment. Indeed, it was later revealed that firms contacted with Joe Allbaugh, one of Bush's Texas "Iron Triangle" and the former head of FEMA who passed along the process of gutting the agency to his former roommate and crony Brownie, received the first no-bid mega-contracts. The Allbaugh-affiliated Shaw Group and then-Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) received the first major contracts for hurricane recovery, with Shaw winning a \$100 million bid to refurbish buildings and build emergency housing and another \$100 contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, while KBR received a \$29.8 million contract from the Pentagon to rebuild Navy bases in the Gulf area.³³

As of summer 2007, vast areas of the Gulf Coast and the city of New Orleans remain in ruin. The intensity of Hurricane Katrina, followed by the devastating Hurricane Rita and Hurricane Dean in August 2007 has portended future possible destruction of regions in the Gulf, lead to speculation that something like a new Marshall Plan, focusing on rebuilding the Gulf Coast guided by environmental restoration and a flood control system like Holland's, as well as providing housing and jobs for the poor, would be needed to deal with the immensity of the tragedy.

On the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina there were many media retrospectives and analyses and a large majority of articles, TV reports, and commentaries documented how little reconstruction had taken place, with the hardest hit poor areas still rubble. Less than half of New Orleans's residents had returned, more than one-third of the garbage had not been picked up, and federal agencies had only spent \$44 billion of the \$110 billion in congressionally approved funds.

Bush's political popularity began a steady decline with what was perceived as his inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina and continued to spiral downwards into the 30% range, never to recover. As Frank Rich summed it up: "The storm . . . was destined to join the tornado that uprooted Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* in the pantheon of American culture . . . The Wizard could never be the Wizard again once Toto parted the curtain and exposed him as Professor Marvel; Bush, too, stood revealed as a blowhard and a snake oil salesman" (see Rich 2006, p. 199).

George W. Bush's entire life has been grounded in monumental failures and perhaps the Katrina spectacles will be seen in retrospect as his Waterloo (Whitney 2005). The spectacles of Iraq, the Terri Schiavo affair, the inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina and the specter of crony capitalism in its

aftermath, and on-going Republican party scandals involving leaders of the House and Senate and key figures in the Bush-Cheney administration, may raise the specter of impeachment—or once again, the Bush administration may survive the ever-erupting media spectacles of scandal that have characterized the regime.³⁴

Whatever the fate of the Bush administration, it is clear that the Hurricane Katrina media spectacle put on display the glaring inequities of race and class that define the U.S. in the new millennium. The inability of the federal government to respond to the catastrophe called attention not only to the failures and incompetence of the Bush administration, but also the crisis of neoliberalism whereby the market alone cannot provide for the needs of citizens and deal with crises. As Henry Giroux argues (2006), Katrina also called attention to a “politics of disposability” whereby certain people are deemed disposable and not worthy of care and help. Market capitalism in the era of neoliberalism has been increasingly predatory with groups of poor people ready to dispose. The biopolitics of inequality and disposability was put on full display in the Katrina spectacle and may be one of the most important after-effects of the tragic episode.

Concluding Comments

“When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs,” Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

The Bush-Cheney administrations will be remembered for the numerous media spectacles in which they were involved, beginning with the spectacle of a stolen election (Kellner 2001), the spectacle of terror on September 11, 2001 (Kellner 2003), the flip-flops and reversals of the spectacle in Iraq (Kellner 2005), and the spectacles analyzed in this study. The ubiquity of media spectacle in the contemporary moment requires critical social theory to make use of cultural studies and cultural studies to deploy critical social theory in engaging the major events of our time.

Cultural studies thus needs to engage critical media studies and social theory to dissect and critique the current system of politics, culture, and the

media in the U.S. today. Media literacy and pedagogy should teach how to read and critically dissect newspapers, TV, radio, the Internet, and other media of news and information to enable students to become active and engaged democratic citizens. While early cultural studies by the Birmingham school included a focus on critically reading newspapers, TV news and information programs, and the images of politics, much cultural studies of the past decades has focused on media entertainment, consumption, and audience response to specific media programs. This enterprise is valuable and important, but it should not replace or marginalize taking on the system of media news and information as well. A comprehensive cultural studies will interrogate news and entertainment, journalism and consumption, and should include media studies as well as textual studies and audience reception studies.

In interrogating discourse and media spectacle in the Bush administration, one also would need to focus on religion and values as well as news and media spectacle.³⁵ Cultural studies has not adequately engaged religion nor often used philosophy in its analyses. In order to talk of a crisis of democracy one needs a normative concept of democracy to fully understand the role of the media and importance of an informed and active citizenry (see Kellner 1990). To criticize any form of culture and politics one needs a standpoint of critique and concepts like truth and falsity to dissect lying and mendacity.³⁶ In the current conjuncture, philosophy has merged with theory and cultural studies needs to constantly interrogate its basic concepts, sharpened in actual analysis and theoretical debate. Cultural studies has been a home and resource for theory since its beginning and needs philosophy and theory to add a self-reflexive and critical dimension and to develop its theoretical resources and problematics.

Notes

1 Woodward 2006 provides detailed background into Powell's briefing and preparation for the UN presentation, his resentment when it was clear he was fed false information, and his being forced out of the Bush administration because of his anger.

2 Wilson also published a memoir attacking the Bush administration mendacity on Iraq and other policies titled The Politics of Truth (2004).

3 A National Intelligence Estimate was leaked and then partly published that showed the Bush administration Iraq policy was recruiting terrorists and threatening U.S. national security; see Mark Mazzetti, "Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat,"

New York Times, September 24, 2006. For the released portions of the report, see http://www.npr.org/documents/2006/sep/redacted_nie.pdf.

4 For an archive of Goebbels work on propaganda, see the German Propaganda web-site at <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/goebmain.htm>.

5 For arguments and evidence of the falsehood of these claims, see Kellner 2005, Rich 2006, and Woodward 2006.

6 On the connection between the ideas of Leo Strauss and U.S. neoconservatives, see Postel 2003.

7 Al Gore, by contrast, believes that Bush knows he is lying: “In a comment that some felt belongs in a file marked ‘Jokes That Reveal Deeper Meaning,’ President Bush said, ‘See, in my line of work, you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda.’ Usually, he was pretty tricky in his exact wording. Indeed, President Bush’s consistent and careful artifice is itself evidence that he knew full well he was telling an artful and important lie, visibly circumnavigating the truth, over and over again, as if he had practiced how to avoid encountering it” (2007, 108).

8 The Downing Street Memos leaked by a high-level British official reveal that the Bush administration had decided on an Iraq war as early as summer 2002, that the British were worried about the legality of the war and lack of post-war planning in Washington, and that both governments sought to shape intelligence and policies that would provide legitimate grounds for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. On the text and context of the Memo and its importance in revealing the mendacity of the Bush-Cheney administration Iraq policy, see Danner 2005. For a series of detailed critiques of the mainstream media neglect of the Downing Street Memo, see Boehlert 2006 and an issue of *Cultural Studies* <> *Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 7, Nr. 2 (May 2007), which has a section dedicated to the Downing Street Memo.

9 When Bush was asked whether the mission in Iraq had indeed been accomplished as the banner proclaimed at an October 28, 2003 press conference, Bush snippily remarked “The ‘Mission Accomplished’ sign, of course, was put up by the members of the U.S.S Abraham Lincoln saying that their mission was accomplished. I know it was attributed somehow to some ingenious advance man from staff.” In fact, the Bush administration had orchestrated every detail of the spectacle; see Bumiller 2003.

10 Media representations of the massive Asian Tsunami of December 2004 broke a taboo against the depiction of dead bodies. While US corporate media coverage of Iraq rarely depicted dead bodies of either Iraqis or US soldiers, and when they did there was massive rightwing protest, the Tsunami coverage showed masses of dead humans, floating in water, heaped up on land, or buried in mass graves. Yet most of these victims

were anonymous, so I am arguing that the Schiavo and Pope John Paul II cases broke taboos against showing intimate processes of death and dying.

11 The facts of the Terri Schiavo case seem to be accurately laid out in the Wikipedia entry, which notes that over ten books have been written on the affair; at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terri_schiavo. See also Joan Didion's attempt to present the tragic story in "The Case of Theresa Schiavo," The New York Review of Books, Vol. 52, Number 10: June 9, 2005.

12 During the period of the intense Schiavo death watch, a young African American boy of six months was taken off of his life support system when a hospital and court ruled that despite the mother's wish to keep the boy alive, the hospital had the right to pull the plug according to the Advance Directives Act signed into law in 1999 by then governor George W. Bush which said that hospitals could take patients off of life support systems if they could not pay and their condition was deemed hopeless. Young Sun Hudson suffered from dwarfism and underdeveloped lungs and his mother hoped that his lungs might develop. See Leonard Pitts Jr., "No One Noticed when Little Sun Died," Herald News, April 9, 2005 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=20637&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>

13 Walter F. Roche Jr. and Sam Howe Verhovek, "DeLay's Own Tragic Crossroads. Family of the lawmaker involved in the Schiavo case decided in '88 to let his comatose father die." Los Angeles Times, March 27, 2005 at <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-delay27mar27,0,5710023.story>.

14 While mainstream television was dominated by the rightwing "Culture of Life" discourse and often the vehicle of outright lies on the Schiavo case, the Internet documented her medical and personal history in detail. While there were, of course, websites spreading the rightwing spin, promoted by her parents (see <http://www.terrisfight.org/>), there were also well-documented sites detailing her case history and containing key medical documents and analyses, see <http://www.miami.edu/ethics2/schiavo/timeline.htm>; <http://phoenixwoman.blogspot.com/2005/03/tale-of-two-scans.html>; and http://abstractappeal.com/archives/2005_04_01_abstractappeal_archive.html#111247976256953671. Time magazine also had a good detailed analysis in their April 4, 2005 of Schiavo's hopeless medical condition.

15 Sam Parry, "Terri Schiavo and the right-wing machine", April 1, 2005 at <http://www.consortiumnews.com/2005/040105.html>. Parry also notes the hypocrisy of Bush's active involvement in the Schiavo case and failure to comment on the March Red Lake Indian reservation "Minnesota school shooting that claimed the lives of 10 people,

the worst such incident since the Columbine massacre in 1999. The apparent logic behind Bush's differing reactions was that the Schiavo case was a cause celebre for Bush's Christian conservative base, while the Minnesota school shooting carried the risk of reviving demands for tighter gun control, which might offend another powerful Bush constituency, the gun lobby."

¹⁶ See Kellner 2003 and 2005.

¹⁷ On extremist Randall Terry's bizarre life and return to media prominence in the Schiavo case, see Tina Susman, "Crusading Once Again," Newsday, April 3, 2005 at <http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/nation/ny-usterr034202000apr03,0,2491642.story>. Terry had abandoned his wife of 19 years, had children out of wedlock, and was eventually thrown out of Operation Rescue and his local church for a number of reasons including "a pattern of repeated and sinful relationship and conversations with both single and married women." Both of Terry's adopted daughters became pregnant outside of marriage, one converting to Islam, while his adopted son came out as gay. Our religious Right puts to shame the antics of Elmer Gantry and fictional hypocritical evangelists.

¹⁸ See the study that claims over 600,000 Iraqis have been killed in the war at <http://www.thelancet.com/webfiles/images/journals/lancet/s0140673606694919.pdf>.

¹⁹ See Carol Marbin Miller, "Police 'showdown' over Schiavo averted." Miami Herald, March 25, 2005 at <http://www.yuricareport.com/BushSecondTerm/PoliceShowdownOverSchiavoAverted.html>.

²⁰ "American Politics Journal 4/5/03—Papal Pap" noted that Cardinal Law did "as much as he inhumanly could to sweep hundreds of instances of crime by pedophile priests in his diocese under the rug. Remember the notorious child abuser Father John Geoghan? Geoghan operated in Law's diocese—and some of Geoghan's victims have accused Law of having known he was a child abuser as early as 1984 (http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/top/features/documents/00882888.htm)." Cardinal Law later presided over one of the major funeral masses for the Pope, leading to sharp critique by members of the Survivor Network of Those Abused by Priests and Catholic liberals; see Larry B. Stimmer, "Bernard Law Given Prominent Funeral Role," Los Angeles Times, April 8, 2005: A13 and "Advocacy Group Leaders to Protest Cardinal Law," The Associated Press, April 9, 2005. The documentary film Deliver Us From Evil (2006) shows the complicity of high members of the Catholic church in covering over pedophile scandals including Los Angeles Bishop Mahoney and Cardinal Ratzinger himself.

21 For critiques of Pope John Paul II's Papacy of the sort absent in the mainstream media, see Barry Healey, "Pope John Paul II, a reactionary in shepherd's clothing" at

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=105&ItemID=7580> and Terry Eagleton, "A British Obituary of Pope John Paul II. The Pope has blood on his hands," at <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=105&ItemID=7578>.

22 For summary of the media reaction to the new Pope's ascendancy and an account of how mainstream media tended to downplay Ratzinger's chances, see Howard Kurtz, "Media Botch Papal Predictions," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2005.

23 See Jack Miles, "The Unholy Alliance Against the Filibuster," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2005.

24 For an engaging documentary on Hurricane Katrina, that takes on the question of the breaching of the levees, see Spike Lee, When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, HBO films, 2006. For a historical overview of problems of storms and flooding in the New Orleans area and day to day account of the Katrina tragedy from August 27 to September 3, 2006, see Brinkley 2006.

25 Allbaugh was known as Bush's enforcer during his stint as Texas governor, allegedly being in charge of sanitizing the records of Bush's National Guard service that suggested he had gone AWOL and not completed his military service; see Kellner 2005.

26 Landey et al 2005 note that Chertoff, not FEMA Director Michael Brown, was in charge of disaster response and delayed federal action. Chertoff was a lawyer and Republican partisan who participated in the Whitewater crusade against Bill Clinton and had no experience in either national security or disaster response when Bush made him head of the Department of Homeland Security.

27 On the issue of race and the history of New Orleans, see Davis 2005.

28 NBC circulated a disclaimer after the show saying that West did not speak for the network and departed from his prepared speech, and also cut the clip from a West coast broadcast three hours later, but the initial video circulated over the Internet and was immediately incorporated into rap songs and anti-Bush websites; see the video clip at <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/hurricanekatrina/v/kanyewestbush.htm> (accessed September 23, 2005) and see Lee 2005.

29 On Bushspeak, see Kellner 2005.

30 At a National Prayer Service in the Washington Cathedral, aimed to replicate a spectacle held right after the September 11 terror attacks, Bush presented the Katrina tragedy as an act of God. See Sullivan 2005.

31 Bush appointed Francis Fargos Townsend to head a federal investigation who it turned out was the wife of his Andover and Yale roommate and a rightwing ideologue; see the discussion in "Fact Check" at www.cjrdaily.org on September 20, 2005.

32 So far there has been little discussion of Rove's role in the administration's post-Katrina policies of which Rove was supposedly in charge. When Rove announced he was resigning in August 2007, there were many retrospectives of his impact on the Bush administration, but so far little discussion of his post-Katrina role.

33 See Yochi J. Dreazen, "In Katrina's Wake: U.S. Names 5 Firms to Build Housing," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2005, p. A10 and *Reuters*, "Firms with Bush-Cheney ties clinching Katrina deals". USA Today, September 10, 2005 at http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-09-10-katrina-contracts_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA.

34 On the specter of impeachment, see **Weiner 2005 and Parry 2005**.

35 On the role of religion in election 2004, see Kellner 2005.

36 On the role of philosophy in cultural studies, see Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies and Philosophy: An Intervention," in Miller 2001: 139-153. For a normative concept of democracy and informed citizenship, see Kellner 1991 and 2005; on truth and mendacity in politics, see my "Lying in Politics: The Case of George W. Bush and Iraq," *Cultural Studies* <> *Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 7, Nr. 2 (May 2007): 132-144.

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