

PERSPECTIVES



These days the media even interview guerrillas, something unheard of during the Vietnam War.

By Dan Halley

IT HAS NEVER BEEN EASY TO get the American public to accept distant wars for dubious causes. Lyndon Johnson was able to escalate in Vietnam only with the aid of a delicate program of news management. The trick was to alarm the people enough that Vietnam would be seen as vital to "national security," but not so much as to raise the specter of another Korean stalemate. It was accomplished by thundering loudly about Communist aggression while keeping as silent as possible about actual plans for future American involvement.

The Reagan administration has been trying to walk this same thin line since its first days in office. But this time news management is failing flat. A majority of the public, according to most polls, fears El Salvador will become the next Vietnam, roughly 80 percent oppose the sending of U.S. combat troops, and, perhaps most striking of all, 51 percent, according to an ABC News-Washington Post poll, say they would support young men who refused to be drafted to fight in Central America.

With its public relations efforts clearly

For media, it's not another Vietnam

failing it is no surprise the Reagan administration is beginning to lash out at the press. Like his predecessors in the early days of the Vietnam war, Reagan has called for "self-censorship" in the interest of national security. The press, he argued in a *TV Guide* interview, should "trust us and put themselves in our hands"; they should consult with officials and hold back on stories "that will result in harm to our nation."

The media, in fact, are becoming the number one scapegoat for the ineffectiveness of Reagan's get-tough policy. The *Wall Street Journal* has led the charge at home, accusing the media in a Feb. 10 editorial of "romanticizing the revolutionaries," and hinting that they were in large part responsible for the success of the Chinese, Cuban, Vietnamese and Iranian revolutions. In El Salvador, the right wing's hatred of the press took a sinister turn with the recent kill-

ing of four Dutch journalists who had made contact with the guerrillas.

Blaming the press for foreign policy failures is nothing new. The Kennedy administration leveled charges of bias and inexperience against the Saigon press corps in the early '60s, long before there was any "Vietnam syndrome." But the media have become skeptical of administration policy much more rapidly, much more deeply and apparently with much more effect on public opinion than was the case in Vietnam.

Coverage of Reagan policy in Central America didn't start out at all critical. Before Reagan came to office, what little El Salvador coverage there was had focused primarily on El Salvador itself, often stressing the human rights emphasis of the Carter administration. But "when the administration came out with this White Paper [*Communist Interference in El Salvador*]," said UPI Mexico City

bureau chief Juan Tamayo, "all the news was communist intervention, communist intervention. Nobody in Washington bothered to mention that this thing had been going on for years, that the guerrillas had been around for a long time, that the government itself...has been accused of human rights violations."

By the end of the administration's first month in office ABC News was introducing stories on "El Salvador and other aspects of U.S.-Soviet relations." Said Mark Seibel of the *Dallas Times-Herald*, "The Reagan administration in this case played the Washington press corps like a harp."

But the administration's cold war rhetoric was a double-edged sword. It changed the terms of news coverage, but it also made El Salvador an issue as it had never been before. "If the Reagan administration hadn't hit the alarm bell," said the *Washington Post's* Chris Dickey, "there would not be the coverage there is now. The press did not make El Salvador a test case. The Reagan administration did." With the secretary of state saying the lesson of Vietnam was simply not to leave the "source [of supply] outside the target area," the media were bound to catch on to the Vietnam parallel sooner or later. When they did, the Reagan administration discovered it had created a monster.

Interviewing guerrillas.

There are now nearly 300 foreign journalists in El Salvador, with many more in the "next El Salvador," Guatemala. And the reporting is strikingly different from the early years of Vietnam.

Take the recent CBS documentary, "Central America in Revolt." In Vietnam, the historical background of the conflict rarely crept into the daily battle report which was the mainstay of news coverage. But in "Central America in Revolt," in a segment also shown on the evening news, the American public learned of the CIA's 1954 overthrow of "perhaps the only democratically-elected president in Guatemalan history."

Coverage of the guerrillas in Vietnam was virtually unheard of. It isn't particularly enlightening in Central American coverage. Guerrillas are rarely asked about their politics. The origin of their arms is the more common angle. But they are, at least, seen and heard. And "Central America in Revolt" went a step further, including interviews with Guatemalan guerrillas who described the evolution of their movement from political to military struggle.

During Vietnam, the news was dominated almost entirely by American offi-

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Writing off third world issues

By David Spurr

IN INDICTING THE U.S. AND other Western nations for "media imperialism," third world critics have pointed to the disproportionate emphasis on violence, conflict and bizarre behavior in news coverage of less developed countries. But this critique may be less revealing than an analysis of style, which shows that the major U.S. media often dismiss the third world point of view through the language they employ.

The crisis in the southwest African territory of Namibia, whose black inhabitants are struggling for political independence from the Union of South Africa, offers a case in point.

The *New York Times'* Flora Lewis refers to this as "the festering Namibian issue." For the *Times'* Joseph Lelyveld it is "the Namibian briar patch," while *U.S. News and World Report* sense incipient Marxism in this "bleak outpost of East-West rivalry." Through the metaphorical content of these phrases, Namibia enters a popular, deeply-rooted American mythology that associates third world and especially African countries

with images of disease, madness, death and the hostile forces of nature. Hence the description of an Angolan village during the current hostilities by the *Washington Post's* Richard Harwood: "It sits on a barren, dusty plain, surrounded by nothingness. I could imagine becoming very violent and depraved after a few years under this broiling sun."

American reporters also appear unable to identify with human forces in the third world. Lewis, for example, depicts a situation in which reasonable, clear-thinking American diplomats are forced to deal with childish and irrational black Africans.

Describing the work of the State Department's Chester A. Crocker, Lewis writes, "He pointed out correctly, if annoyingly to Africans, that Washington can't just push a button and deliver an independent, majority-ruled Namibia." She then cites "senior Western diplomats who have followed African quarrels for years" in order to observe: "The black nations are becoming increasingly aware of their need to concentrate on their own problems."

Lewis' style coincides with that of correspondent Gregory Jaynes who, on returning from an African "tour of duty," reflects wearily in the *Times*: "These nations are so very young, and many are so

very foolish, as only the young can be."

Or one can cite a *Time* magazine essay, which takes the global view: "In the long run it is in the interests of the West and its wealthy friends in the third world to wean the poorer nations from their current paradoxical addiction: socialist nostrums at home financed by capitalist largesse from abroad." In this language the West is not only wealthy; it is also healthier and wiser than the poorer nations which, like Jaynes' foolish young, must be weaned from their innocent but fallen condition.

Perhaps most damaging to American understanding of the current crisis, however, is the almost total absence of the black Namibian voice in U.S. news reporting on that country. Out of nine articles on Namibia appearing in *Time* and *Newsweek* in the past 14 months, only two are based on a visit to the country itself. Instead, most of the articles focus on debate over the future of Namibia in Washington, Geneva, the United Nations and Pretoria. While such negotiations certainly deserve coverage, the overall effect is to portray black Africa as seen through white eyes—be they American, European or South African.

Even when American newsmen take the trouble to visit black Africa, they

seem incapable of talking to ordinary people about what is happening to their country. Last March, for example, *Time* sent two correspondents into Namibia along with South African troops attempting to put down revolutionary activities of the Southwest African People's Organization (SWAPO). While neutral in tone, the *Time* report relies exclusively on South African commanders for assessment of the conflict, and shows the most concern for their tactical difficulties—as in the observation that "it is exceedingly difficult for South African troops to distinguish enemy guerrillas from the local populace."

It is this same "enemy," of course, that the UN recognizes as "the authentic representative of the Namibian people."

In the face of systematically superficial and condescending news media, American readers and broadcast listeners are left with questions that don't occur often enough to their foreign correspondents: What do the people of Namibia say about what is happening to their country? How do they view their American and European employers in the uranium, copper and diamond mines? What conditions must prevail for Namibia to survive as an independent state?

In order for the American news media to become truly informative, journalists must seek a new press freedom—not from government control, but from the narrow avenues of their own minds. ■

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KATE ELLIS

What do we mean in saying family?

By Kate Ellis

WHEN I OPEN UP A copy of *In These Times* these days, I find myself humming the title song from *Alfie*: "What's it all about...?" I am referring, of course, to the debate between Michael Lerner and me, and co-starring John Judis, Jim Rinnert, Greg Calvert, Ray Olsen, the *ITT 21* and all those who have joined in via the letters column. Everyone on this list is for increased social spending to benefit children and those who care for them. So what's keeping us apart?

What it's all about, I think, is language—our most important political tool. After all, the impetus behind the debate is a sense of outrage that Jesse Helms and his gang would dare to call themselves "pro-family." When they use the word "family" they mean Father Knows Best. And what father knows best is that gays, blacks, uppity women, spineless liberals and kids who have been taught about sex in school are undermining his authority.

It would be nice if we had a single definition of the family to counterpose to this. Instead, I suggest that we have two, and the debate is over whose should be used in our campaign against the right. One that I call the "maximalist definition" is advanced by Michael Lerner, who changed the name of his organization from Friends of the Family to Friends of Families better to reflect his position.

Lerner defines the family as "the place where human love and intimacy can be treated as the highest value." He acknowledges that it is not always such a place, but affirms his belief that "love is possible." People are loving by nature, and if the capitalist work world did not frustrate them and tire them out, they would maintain long-term relationships.

Lerner therefore calls on the left to adopt a pro-family program in the form of a Family Bill of Rights demanding child care, paid maternity and paternity leaves, safety and health committees at worksites, a 35-hour work week and tax breaks for "any parent participating in a neighborhood or workplace parent support group that meets at least once a month for 10 months in the year to discuss the common problems faced by parents and families, or for any parent completing a course in family relations, child development or communication skills."

Aside from this last idea (which reminds a Mormon friend of mine of nothing more than the thoroughly patriarchal church she

left behind), there is nothing here that the left does not support. What Lerner's critics object to is the way he proposes to package and sell his program to those Americans who are turned off by the left because of its association with sexual permissiveness in general and with the gay and women's movements in particular.

The centerpiece of this package is an American Families Day complete with "family games, activities for children, singalongs, community dancing (with special sensitivity to making the dancing possible for family members of all ages), picnics and the creation of Family Rituals, as the community collectively acknowledges that building families is a hard task, that the people who are attempting to do so need much support and that support will come in large part from each other as we attempt to build a public awareness that family life needs and deserves support."

The wrapping on this package is something called "the community." But this word, too, can mean several things. Lerner seems to think of it as the family writ large, a place for love and intimacy—a warm environment in which to talk about family problems. What makes me a minimalist on the issue of the family is that, for me, this vision of individuals embedded in womb-like communities leaves out too much of the human spirit to make it either a truthful image or a realistic goal. As with "the family," a lot of things done in the name of "the community"—defined in purely moral, noneconomic terms—are repressive and even cruel.

A minimalist definition of the family begins with the premise that language is a system of conventions through which people learn how their culture puts the world together and what it expects of them. It is not a rigid system: words acquire new meanings as these expectations and models of the world adapt to more refined observation and to cultural changes propelled by technology. Nevertheless, we shy away from the idea, expressed by Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, that a word means what we choose it to mean.

Perhaps we would like there to be an institution whose sole reason for being lay in giving love and support regardless of a person's disposition, behavior or achievements. The family performs this task imperfectly not because its adult members work long hours for low pay, but because human beings are limited and the family performs an important additional function that the maximalists leave out. As an institution with a public as well as a private face, it socializes its members so that they can function effectively within their culture.

To locate the source of all domestic unhappiness in the world of work, as Lerner does, exaggerates a partial truth. But it also exacerbates a split between that world and the private world of love and intimacy by emphasizing the disjunction between the noncompetitive ethos of the family and the competitive ethos of capitalist work. Feminists know that competitiveness between women is learned at home. But they also object to a privatized definition of family because the public/private split on which it rests has always been used to subordinate women.

Lerner's aim is to claim the family as our institution, in contrast to the way feminism has often defined it as *their* institution. The right's definition of the family has not only a good deal of history but reality on its side. Love and intimacy work against social control, but they are also its subject and its agents.

Consider the parental notification provisions of the right's "profamily" legislation. Why should the left oppose these if,

as Judis says in support of Lerner, the family provided "a home and security for its members" and "a protected space for love and sex," neither more nor less? Access to intimacy, backed up by the threat of loss of love, is part of the parental tool chest, though the use of those tools may vary widely. Parents make rules, but they also follow them.

One thing that makes the white nuclear family so problematic now is that its members expect more of it than past generations did. What was once an organic economic unit (often described through metaphors of the body, with father as head, mother as heart, etc.) has now become an aggregate of related individuals, each with rights that may be in conflict. Consequently, the interests of women, children and other dependents—once assumed to be identical with those of the father—are now demanding and receiving support from "the family."

The history of the nuclear family is a history of the partly successful struggle of these subordinate groups, particularly in

have, in outline, the only program that will achieve that end. Public control of the economy will require the creation of decision-making bodies that can fill the void between powerful bureaucracies and the isolated family.

I've been reading the responses of workers in Elizabeth, N.J., to the closing of the Singer plant after 109 years. There were company-sponsored dances and ball games and a sense of continuity between generations of Elizabeth residents who worked at the plant—all jettisoned now as Singer shows the other side of its paternalism. Lerner proposes to create a community out of family support groups and safety committees on the job. But these will be exercises in futility if their aim is to support the family rather than to control companies like Singer, whose recreation halls have undoubtedly generated family rituals as they integrated social (private) life with the economic (public) life of their host communities. The residents of Elizabeth need economic democracy, not courses in how to talk to your lover or



the area of sexual validation. Fallen women are no longer regularly driven from the door, the names of gay children are sometimes uttered at family gatherings and masturbators are not usually beaten. Now the right thinks the family is giving out this validation too promiscuously.

The escalation in expectations put upon the family goes hand in hand with its increasing isolation, its relegation to the private sphere. The right opposes this. It wants to give the family as a family (read: the father as a father) a role in public policymaking and blames the beneficiaries of the family's increased sexual permissiveness for the decline in its public power. To counter this, the left needs to decide who should be making the decisions (over school curriculum, for instance) that the right wants to give back to parents.

The impossibility of coming up with a simple left position on parental input into education should alert us to the complexity of the issues being raised by the right. Visions of a magically invoked "community" collectively deciding to support the family by having everyone dance to the same tunes only mask the depth of the problem. The right is addressing the public perception of an impersonal, bureaucratic apparatus invisibly controlling people's lives. At the other end of the spectrum of power is the family—the only institution that confers on its members a sense of identity, continuity and control.

We share with those to whom the right is speaking not their perception of the family but their perception of its context. And though we have not yet talked very much about changing that context, we

teenage children.

If economic and political decision-making can be "brought back home" through public control of the workplace, if unions and geographic communities can gain power over their resources and elected officials and if those officials can have leverage over corporations—as the mayor of Elizabeth did not have over Singer—then people will not see the family as the only social institution that fosters love, support, respect and cooperation. Socialists have refused to confine those qualities to the home and we should deepen that tradition, not abandon it.

If Judis is referring to tax dollars for, among other things, education, child care and AFDC when he speaks of the special responsibility that society bears toward the child bearing family, we don't need him to tell us that childless people will not receive these benefits. To speak to the concerns the right is addressing we need more than a defense of the welfare state. What the left brings to the discussion of the family is an insistence on looking at the underlying causes of the crisis in personal life.

High on the list of these is the erosion of the economic base of community life. How the quality of personal life (in families and out of them) would be affected by a democratized economy cannot be fully predicted. But socialists have a vision of the human use of human capabilities. Applying that vision to places like Elizabeth is much more difficult than pursuing a fantasy of unconditional love. We need to focus, in other words, not on improving our havens, but rather on making the world less heartless. ■

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