

Lies Of Our Times

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His Critics**

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Cover: Earth First! activist Judi Bari holding the incriminating Oakland Police Department photograph; see next page. Credit: Evan Johnson / Impact Visuals.

Missing Acknowledgments:

The July-August issue featured two photos from the Center for Cuban Studies showing the devastating effects on Cuba of the March storm. Photo credits should have included the photographers. The photo of a flooded Havana on page 14 was by Nancy Stout from CCS; the picture of the ruined banana crops on page 15 was taken by Arnaldo Santos of *Granma*. Our apologies.

Rising Costs and All That Jazz:

Readers will note that the cover price of LOOT has gone up and, for the first time since we began publishing nearly four years ago, subscription prices have been raised, albeit by a smallish amount. We regret this necessary capitulation to the economic system. Let's hope we can keep the prices steady for another four years.

Lies Of Our Times

A Magazine to Correct the Record
Published by
Sheridan Square Press, Inc.
Produced and Distributed by
Institute for Media Analysis, Inc.

145 West 4th Street
New York, NY 10012
Tel: (212) 254-1061
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Lies Of Our Times, Volume 4, Number 9,
whole number 39, September 1993, copy-
right © 1993, by Sheridan Square Press, Inc.,
and Institute for Media Analysis, Inc. All
rights reserved. Indexed in the *Alternative
Press Index*. Available in microform from
University Microfilms. Printed in the U.S.A.

Lies Of Our Times (ISSN: 1046-7912) is published
monthly (except February and August) for \$28 per year
by Sheridan Square Press, Inc., 145 West 4th Street,
New York, NY 10012. Second-class postage paid at
New York, NY, and additional mailing office. POST-
MASTER: Send address changes to *Lies Of Our
Times*, 145 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012.

To Our Readers

Lies Of Our Times is a magazine
of media criticism. "Our Times" are
the times we live in but also the
words of the *New York Times*, the
most cited news medium in the U.S.,
our paper of record. Our "Lies" are
more than literal falsehoods; they en-
compass subjects that have been ig-
nored, hypocrisies, misleading em-
phases, and hidden premises—the
biases which systematically shape
reporting. We can address only a
sampling of the universe of media
lies and distortions. But we hope
LOOT will go a long way toward
correcting the record.

Nader Decks Rosenthal

The January/February 1993 edition of Public Citizen included editor Peter Nye's interview with consumer activist Ralph Nader. Entitled "Interview with Ralph Nader: Looking Into the 21st Century," the six-page article included Nader's assessment of the challenge facing consumer activists in gaining media access: An excerpt follows

Ralph Nader: [We gain access] only at the sufferance of whoever controls the media. When they switch you off, you don't get through. Back in 1973, the *New York Times* decided, through a new editor who took over, that they weren't going to cover consumer issues very much in Washington. Suddenly our issues wouldn't get in the *New York Times*. One man made that decision. We don't have our own audience network.

Peter Nye: Was that *Times* editor Abe Rosenthal?

Nader: Yes. He did more to damage consumer causes than any other person in the United States. Once he switched off the *Times*, the *Washington Post* switched off. Once the *Post* and the *Times* switched off, then pretty much everyone switched off.

LOOT reprints below the exchange between Ralph Nader and A.M. Rosenthal that appeared in the May/June 1993, issue of Public Citizen. Rosenthal was responding to the above passage.

A friend has sent me a copy of your publication in which you carry an interview with Ralph Nader attacking me.

Mr. Nader says that as editor I decided that the *New York Times* would no longer cover consumer news, that "our issues" could not get into print, that the *Washington Post* "switched off" following my lead and that then the networks did the same and that I did more damage to consumer causes than any other person in the United States.

Mr. Nader, I understand, has made the same accusations before. I never replied because I did not see them myself and thought that whoever told me about them must be misinformed or exaggerating.

Now that I have seen the charges, I would like to say that they are individually and collectively monstrous lies.

The exact opposite is true, as most newspaper people and readers can tell you. Under my leadership, from the beginning, and with the help of my senior colleagues, the *Times* covered consumer affairs and consumerism more intensively than ever before—in fact became famous for it.

Frequently, privately and publicly, I told members of my staff that Mr. Nader had affected all journalism by his own attention to consumer affairs and that we must not give up on the subject,

Public Citizen is published bi-monthly by Public Citizen Foundation. Subscriptions are \$20/year from 2000 P Street, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036.

ever.

I do not know why Mr. Nader is guilty of circulating these falsehoods. I have been told that he says he got the story from a member of the staff. That does not ring true to me, because all Mr. Nader had to do to verify the story was to read the paper, and if he did not trust his own eyes, he could have called me. It is interesting, and important, to note that Mr. Nader never picked up the phone and called me to see if there was any truth in what he had been saying.

I think Mr. Nader has been guilty of spreading damaging falsehoods without making the effort to check them out.

The only logical explanation for his strange conduct is that he believes that coverage of consumer affairs is no coverage if it does not involve him and his organization directly.

Obviously, if he can spread such falsehoods about me and my newspaper, it is impossible to believe anything he says. Thus, he does damage not to me but to the consumer movement.

And, incidently, you [Peter Nye] and your publication [*Public Citizen*] are guilty of unprofessional conduct to have printed the interview containing his charges without yourself doing anything to verify them.

I expect this letter to be printed in the next issue and request you to send me a copy.

A.M. Rosenthal
The New York Times

Ralph Nader replies:

Mr. Rosenthal says I never called him. Not true. In the mid-1970s, I got through to him by telephone and urged him to do a feature story on the New York Public Interest Research Group, a student-funded and -run citizen organization with dozens of full-time staff and offices throughout the state. During the next

AP / Wide World Photos



Ralph Nader at the opening of his 1992 write-in campaign for president.

14 years, no feature ever appeared on this effective consumer group.

Later I wrote Mr. Rosenthal a letter which said that after 12 *New York Times* reporters complained to me about the low priority given consumer reporting, it was time to appeal to him. I called his office, where I received confirmation that my letter had arrived. Apparently he was too busy to respond.

Because Rosenthal is known by *Times* reporters to be a power steeped in rage and retribution, to mention the names of reporters still on the staff would be to expose them to his still pervasive influence. But former *Times* reporters such as Fran Cerra, Dave Burnham, Chris Lydon, and Ben Franklin can testify to the low and sporadic priority given to coverage of federal regulatory agencies—their nonenforcement of consumer protection laws, and their cushy relationships with industry lobbyists.

Each time a *Times* staffer was assigned to the Washington bureau to be a full-time consumer reporter, he found himself frequently assigned to other political stories, or not supported by the New York office to do the digging necessary. Again and again, I would be called by the latest “new” consumer reporter for the *Times* in New York and Washington for corporate power-consumer abuse ideas and the reporter would find herself or himself shunted away from these hot-potato areas into soft consumer advice or other non-consumer assignments.

The late Jack Morris, echoing many reporters in the Washington bureau who came after him, found it difficult to get stories past the New York editors into print. “I keep sending the stories up, but they’re not making it into the paper,” he told me, noting that it was becoming futile to spend the time to write them. Pretty soon, before the mid-1970s, the Washington bureau chief got the message and did not treat the regulatory agency-consumer beat as very important. This from a newspaper that made itself proud in the period 1966 to 1971 covering prominently, often in the A-section, topics such as car safety, consumer group reports and testimony, congressional hearings on consumer abuses, and antitrust cases—to name just a few.

During the Reagan years, when the federal cops were taken off the corporate beat, this neglect left consumers in the dark. Indifference to the broad range of topics relating to the impact that governments and companies have on the health, safety, and economic status of consumers (compared to the space devoted to soft life-style articles for suburban yuppies and to business and sports pages by the *Times*) becomes more important due to the imitation effect that the *Times* has on other major print and electronic network media. Too often, the *Times* is their compass, and they follow the leader.

For more than 15 years, the steel-willed Rosenthal controlled the compass. By the time he took over in the early 1970s as chief

Hazel Hankin / Impact Visuals



A small haven of green in the South Bronx, New York City. As A.M. Rosenthal beefed up coverage of sports, business, and soft life-style issues appealing to upper-income readers, the *Times* neglected the concerns of neighborhoods such as these.

September 1993

Editor, Rosenthal had become a firm neo-conservative and the *Times* finances were slipping. Rosenthal moved quickly to start special sections appealing to upper-income readers, whom advertisers prefer. The Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and the poor parts of Manhattan where lower income people were exploited by merchants, landlords, and crooked politicians, received comparatively less space than Long Island and Westchester County, except for reporting of street crimes. After all, Rosenthal had nothing if not a business sense. The profit curve went up, and Rosenthal's power became more concentrated.

By the time Rosenthal was taking over, business executives were complaining in earnest to top *Times* executives and editors about what they believed to be the anti-business articles of some reporters, otherwise known as consumer reporting. I was told of these complaints reaching receptive high-level ears by sources at the *Times* in tones of dread and revulsion.

Now it could be that Rosenthal defines consumer reporting differently. He did start a weekly Saturday consumer page. One of the first reporters assigned there expected it to be half shopping tips, the other half investigative reporting. Alas, the page devolved into items of boutique interest to yuppie shoppers, financial planning pieces, and the infrequent "hard story."

Consumer reporting, in contrast to soft "news you can use" features (worthwhile in their own right), is reporting about abuses of power that afflict consumers—product defects, service frauds, litigation, financial shenanigans by banks, insurance companies, and brokerage houses against consumers, inaction by mandated regulatory agencies and lax or corporate-indentured congressional committees, and comparable reporting at the state and local level. Even when an occasional committee would hold vigorous oversight hearings, the *Times* routinely was not there.

The *Times* missed being first, second, or third on many stories—the savings and loan scandals, the mid-1980s phony liability crisis contrived by the insurance industry, the crude activities of the George Bush "Task Force on Regulatory Relief," and on and on. Washington-based consumer groups holding press con-

ferences on these stories were almost always ignored by the *Times*. Reporters would tell us, "New York doesn't like these stories." New York told them, they said, not to cover these groups' reports, often announced at news conferences. These reporters were also told by New York (namely, Rosenthal) not to go with stories charging corporations with misbehaving without getting the companies' response. Fair enough—except the companies' representatives learned simply not to return calls, knowing that tactic would block the story deadline. These companies know about Rosenthal, too.

The overall tragedy of the newspaper in this respect is that when it did a good job pre-Rosenthal, *Times* people were proud of their life-saving contribution to a safer, more informed, and better society. The newspaper changed because the ship's captain took them on a profit-seeking detour.

If Mr. Rosenthal says that the *Times* has not changed since he left his editorship, that is only a tragic tribute to the momentum of his deplorable legacy.

Peter Nye replies:

The charge of unprofessional conduct by me and my publication is grossly unfair. The interview was a question-and-answer format.

Lies Of Our Times Editorial Internships

Lies Of Our Times sponsors a comprehensive intern program for students and recent college graduates interested in journalism and media criticism. Positions are available in New York City and in Philadelphia. Applicants should send a cover letter and résumé, writing samples, and recommendations to:

LOOT Internship Program, 145 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012.

Nader On Free Trade

Ralph Nader may be this country's most prominent and respected consumer advocate, but the mainstream media give him little access or attention. Thus, when it came to reporting Nader's strong and well-thought out views on the impact on consumers of the Uruguay round of GATT and NAFTA talks, it was not the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* but the *Financial Times* of London that gave him a public hearing. (Nancy Dunne, "A consuming interest in trade," May 18, 1993, p. 4).

Although favoring freer trade and tariff reductions, Nader's view is that these should not be implemented until there are "alternative employment opportunities." Furthermore, he argues that the U.S. should restructure its relations to give the greatest trade advantages to countries that uphold worker and human rights.

Nader is also critical of contemporary trade agreements.

"Trade agreements are becoming more and more blatantly overreaching.... They are going way beyond tariffs and traditional commercial issues into overriding what they call 'technical barriers to trade.'" Nader fears that the multinationals will use these agreements to weaken workplace safety and food and health regulations. He favors abandoning GATT and allowing limits on sovereignty in international agreements only to a democratic trading organization that can be petitioned by citizens and governments.

Nader opposes any trade alliance with Mexico, which has "fundamental police state characteristics" and "a comparative advantage" because of non-enforcement of child labor laws, and where, in general, "non-enforcement of laws is a way of life." He regards the *maquiladoras* as disastrous in terms of their impact on the environment and on those that work them.

Nader has thought hard about these issues. It is a sad reflection of the bias and trivialization of mainstream commentary that the mass media have not found room for his views.