

THE NEWS BEHIND THE NEWS

By Michael Ventura

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A long morning line at a designer coffee joint in Lubbock, Texas. The man behind me is maybe 67, large-bellied, white beard and hair, kind of slumpy, with big lonely eyes. He speaks with a deep classic drawl. I'm carrying a *USA Today*; he nudges toward it, says, "How's that paper lean? Left or right?" "Not left, not all that right either." He nods. It interests me that my not-at-all-Texas hat and gray ponytail don't put him off; he hasn't assumed I'm left or right. "I read –," and he mentions a paper with a name like "Newsmax," I'm not sure, I've not heard of it. "It's right. That's what I like. Thank God for President Bush. September 11, after he spoke – oh, I felt so good. If it 'a' been Gore – well, oh my God." I just nod, a gesture of neither agreement nor disagreement. Nothing will change this man's mind, and it's clear that I'm the only conversation he's had all morning; why should it be unpleasant for him? He wears no wedding ring. He's a discarded old man, alone in Lubbock, and Bush can make him feel "so good."

"An'," he says, almost eagerly, "what about that Kerry, it's all lies, that stuff about his war record!" That's a little much for me so I say, "I doubt the truth of that." "Well, on Fox they're sayin' –," and he repeats what "they're" saying. "I doubt the truth of that," I say again, evenly and quietly. "I think that's just politics." Then I add, in the same tone, "A man's got a right to what he did in combat." "Well, I figure he threw that over the wall with those medals, he lost that then." I pause. I want to put this well and I don't want to offend him. I say, "You never lose what you've done." He pauses. Looks down, looks up. "I don't guess I'd know if I'd 'a had the courage. I mean, I was in Vietnam twice, but it wasn't nothing much – I was on an air base surrounded by Marines. We got shelled a little, was all. I wasn't looking down any gun barrels."

Then he ordered his latte. By way of goodbye he said, "Register to vote!" Even after my defense of Kerry? Interesting. It seemed clear that though he relished the slander about John Kerry's military record, he didn't really believe it. He just liked how it might hurt Kerry. Even Fox News broadcast John McCain's defense of Kerry's war record, McCain's call on Bush to repudiate the slander, and the tepid White House response. When pressed slightly, my conversant had obliquely admitted Kerry's courage and spoke with the decent humility most of us feel when contemplating such a war record, we who haven't looked down gun barrels. This man just liked being lied to, as long as the lie reinforced what he wished to believe. That's human enough, and who hasn't succumbed to such self-deception at one time or another? That is precisely the human frailty that Bush plays to. Little wonder a Bush speech could make my queue companion feel "so good."

If I'd been carrying my *New York Times* it's doubtful he would have spoken to me, but the Aug. 3 issue explains the slander attacks on Kerry: "The Democrats' gathering in Boston appears to have helped Mr. Kerry pull even with the president for the first time among veterans who are registered voters, a CBS news poll issued yesterday suggests. After the convention, 48% of them favored Mr. Kerry, and 47% Mr. Bush. In June, Mr. Kerry trailed Mr. Bush among veterans by 15 percentage points, and by mid-July he had narrowed the gap to six."

That also helps explain the bogus terror alerts issued by Homeland Security directly after the convention. On the same day, the *Times* headlined: REPORTS THAT

LED TO TERROR ALERT WERE YEARS OLD, OFFICIALS SAY. The next day, Aug. 4, *USA Today*: OFFICIALS DON'T SEE ATTACKS AS IMMINENT. Quoting Howard Dean's statement – "I am concerned that every time something happens that's not good for President Bush, he plays this trump card, which is terror." – *USA Today* laconically added that it "prompted Ridge [of Homeland Security] to proclaim Tuesday, for the second time in less than a month, that 'we don't do politics in the Department of Homeland Security.' The last time he said that, he was standing on the Boston waterfront, just days before Kerry's political convention, answering charges he was hyping the possibility of terrorism around the convention to grab attention from Kerry."

But there is another and even more urgent reason that the White House resorted, yet again, to blatantly false propaganda and scare tactics to take over the front page. In the days following the Democratic Convention, with its battle cry of "Help Is on the Way," the worst economic stats of the year were issued – and, since they could not be plausibly denied, they had to be pushed to the back pages of the newspapers, while the news-talk shows had to be diverted into blah-blah about terror alerts. For on the same day as the above quote, *USA Today* headlined its business section: RECORD OIL PRICE SLAPS STOCKS IN THE FACE. "Crude oil's run at another high Tuesday prompted stocks to slip and slide downward and erase most of the gains from the previous three sessions." The oil execs in the White House (remember that Condoleezza Rice has an oil tanker named after her?) knew that was coming and, unlike the talking heads, they know what it means. As my friend Dave Johnson put it:

"The real issue is that, for all the gas-guzzling vehicles, only a very small portion of our energy consumption has to do with consumers as users. The nation, however, is vastly and heavily and terminally dependent on oil imports for our industrial processes. This oil price could be our unraveling, and John Q. Public won't realize the real implications until he gets a pink slip without a severance package." Higher oil prices make manufacturing much more expensive, and what manufacturing we have left will move to cheaper labor markets. More jobs lost.

And that same day, that same paper, deeper within the business section, the scariest business news in a long time: "Consumer spending nose-dived in June, suffering the biggest drop since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as shoppers cut back on purchases of such big-ticket items as cars, the government said." The biggest drop since 9/11, though there was no dramatic reason to spike such a drop. That signals economic trouble. Without terror alerts, the consumer "nose-dive" would have dominated the news right after the Democratic Convention; instead of having to respond to questions about terror, Kerry and Edwards would have been rightfully pounding away on economics and the GOP would have had a very bad week. Instead: scare tactics and slander.

Even so, on Aug. 7, *The Dallas Morning News* did its job and ran this on the front page: JOB CREATION STUNNINGLY WEAK. "The U.S. economy created only 32,000 jobs in July, much fewer than economists' forecasts of 200,000 to 300,000. That dismal showing followed on the heels of a weak June report, and it even included a downward revision of the numbers originally reported in May and June. ... Clyde Prestowitz of the Economic Strategy Institute estimated, 'for every dollar spent on U.S. consumption, probably 40 cents goes for products produced elsewhere. ... Our economy is creating a lot of jobs, but a lot of them are not being created here.'" Which explains why consumer spending in June was the worst since 9/11 – and it makes this Aug. 10 report from *The Wall Street Journal* all the more disturbing:

WORLD FACTORY OUTPUT FALLS, CLOUDING RECOVERY. "Factories world-wide cut production in June, raising doubts about the durability of the global economic recovery. ... A number of larger economies also recorded surprise declines in output in June. ... Higher energy costs are pressuring profit margins." On the same day, *The Dallas Morning News*, p.2: OIL MARKET MAY BE ONE MAJOR SUPPLY DISRUPTION FROM CRISIS. "Total world oil demand is 81 million barrels a day, and oil producers have the capacity to produce only about 1.5 million barrels a day more than that. ... Losing supply from any of the trouble spots could erase that amount of daily oil production and more. ... 'Prices could skyrocket' if an accident, natural disaster or sabotage were to take away a significant amount of production, Deutsche Bank analyst Adam Sieminski said in a research note."

When asked about the economy, Bush repeats his mantra that more tax cuts for the rich will fix all this. That lame policy is all he can offer besides bogus alerts and rank slander. My coffee-shop conversant doesn't want to hear the facts, and neither does half of America. Yet the stage is set for terrible economic times. The facts are being reported, usually on the back pages, but not discussed. What we have to fear, much more than terrorism, is a world economy gone out of control and a White House that refuses to acknowledge, much less face, the crisis.

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