

# From Sidekick to Sideshow— Celebrity, Entertainment, and the Politics of Distraction

## Why Americans Are “Sleepwalking Toward the End of the Earth”

Timothy C. Weiskel  
*Harvard University’s Extension School*

In America, entertainment celebrities have entered politics, and the news media have become part of the entertainment industry. At the same time, political figures cultivate their role as celebrities, with image handlers and engineered media campaigns that treat voters like fans. President Bush has modeled himself on Ronald Reagan—the “western” movie actor as much as the president. The role bears little relation to reality, but it has become commonly accepted by a politically obsequious press and a movie-loving public. The persona is actively promoted by the White House as part of the politics of distraction—a strategy designed to keep the public from learning about what is being done in its name and with its tax dollars. The politics of distraction can explain why the public has failed to perceive the global climate crisis, but Americans will need to awake soon from this dream state if they wish to survive.

**Keywords:** *politics of distraction; celebrity politics; climate change; media ownership; White House press coverage*

We have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality.  
—Boorstin (1961/1992)

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the signs have been clear that the American political system has changed into a celebrity regime.  
—West and Orman (2002)

This is the politics of distraction, and by shifting the public’s attention from the essential to the superficial, it does the nation a great disservice.  
—Samwick (2004)

---

**Author’s Note:** This article was completed in June 2005, accepted in July of 2005 and edited for publication in August 2005, before the events surrounding hurricane Katrina.

## The Politics of Distraction

It is hard to escape a pervasive and growing sense that celebrities are becoming involved in politics. Perhaps this has always been so and there is nothing new under the sun. It may well be, however, that the phenomenon has increased in recent years and furthermore, that this trend signals a profound sea change in American political communications. Pursuing this hypothesis, I argue that in an age of escalating global resource war and in the face of an omnipresent corporate entertainment industry, we are now witnessing a subtle, intentional, and seemingly permanent transition to the politics of distraction. Celebrities become politicians and politicians aspire to become celebrities as voters are relegated to the role of fans. All the while, power is ever more concentrated in the hands of a few who stage-manage pseudoevents from behind the scenes.

Without independent access to information about what occurs behind the scenes, the public is marginalized and diverted from effective engagement as citizens. In the most powerful democracy on Earth, with nonstop media coverage of political celebrities, national politics have become a sideshow where clowns and buffoons strut and bellow across a movable stage to divert the public's attention from what is really shaping their lives and determining the future fate of the planet. This shift to a permanent politics of distraction deserves deliberate scrutiny if we hope to move beyond it and restore meaning to the practice of democracy in 21st-century America.

### Our Circumstance: "Sleepwalking to the End of the Earth"

The gravity of the problem at hand and the thoroughness of the transformation of American political communication can be grasped by considering the problem of climate change. There is a striking contrast between how this problem is characterized in America and how it is viewed throughout the rest of world. The difference in these perceptions emanates primarily from a systematic devotion of the Bush administration to the politics of distraction.

In February of this year, the London *Independent* published a widely read article by commentator Lean (2005) on the global human condition. Alluding to the famous cinema drama that serves as a backdrop to understanding our situation, he titled the article "Apocalypse Now: How Mankind Is Sleepwalking to the End of the Earth." In his column, Lean emphasized that the global crisis had become dramatically apparent to world leaders by early 2005 but, as yet, the human community is not responding with effective policies to the warnings of the world's top scientists. Evoking a trans-historical perspective, Lean lamented,

Future historians, looking back from a much hotter and less hospitable world, are likely to pay special attention to the first few weeks of 2005. As they puzzle over how a whole generation could have sleepwalked into disaster—destroying the climate that has allowed

human civilisation to flourish over the past 11,000 years—they may well identify the past weeks as the time when the last alarms sounded.

Last week, 200 of the world's leading climate scientists—meeting at Tony Blair's request at the Met Office's new headquarters at Exeter—issued the most urgent warning to date that dangerous climate change is taking place, and that time is running out.

Next week the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty that tries to control global warming, comes into force after a seven-year delay. But it is clear that the protocol does not go nearly far enough. (paras. 1-3)

Partially because the current administration opposed it, partially because the American press was ignorant of its significance, the Kyoto Protocol passed into effect on February 16, 2005, without much public commentary in America. Few Americans understand its importance or how it is now widely understood to be only a first step in a far greater transformation that humanity will have to undertake to survive.

British commentators were not alone in portraying the gravity of the issues at stake. In Kolbert's (2005) conclusion to a three-part series on climate change published in *The New Yorker*, she underscored our dire dilemma in a similarly apocalyptic tone: "It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing" (final para.).

As foreboding as their statements may sound to the public, however, neither Lean (2005) nor Kolbert (2005) said anything fundamentally new. Instead they simply drew attention to the weight of the scientific understanding of our current circumstance. All of this has been widely known among scientists for decades. In 1992, for example, the late Nobel physicist Henry Kendall organized a group of more than 100 Nobel laureates to sign a major document, the *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*, which begins with the baldly stated paragraph,

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about. (Union of Concerned Scientists, 1992, para. 1)

What, then, can account for this massive and potentially tragic public ignorance about global climate and environmental change? Where is political leadership in America on such momentous issues? In a country saturated with 24-7, nonstop reporting of something that is called "news," and with competing parties fiercely contesting elections for local and national office on a regular basis, how could both the American public and the leaders clambering for public attention have so thoroughly missed the significance of such colossal phenomena? In short, why are Americans—in the words of Lean (2005)—"sleepwalking to the end of the Earth?"

The answer to this troubling question is not trivial. Reasons for this systemic ignorance need to be sought in the profound transformation of American public discourse and evolution of political communications in the past several decades. Yes, Americans are bewildered, mystified, and confused, but the reasons for this are neither bewildering nor mystifying nor confusing. In fact, they are quite simple.

Briefly put, the American public has been led astray by the politics of distraction. As scholars have pointed out, the politics of distraction work essentially by “shifting the public’s attention from the essential to the superficial” (Samwick, 2004, p. 5).<sup>1</sup> If public attention can be diverted systematically in this manner, the politics of distraction can emerge as the dominant form of political behavior in any culture. “Advanced” or “mature” democracies with highly developed communications systems are not immune to this prospect. On the contrary, they may be more vulnerable to this kind of shift than the nascent or newly emergent democracies where citizens have struggled to exercise the privilege to vote and are not about to “sleepwalk” anywhere. Their eyes are wide open. They have been governed for too long by phonies and charlatans to be easily fooled by politicians playacting as celebrities.

By contrast, in America, the politics of distraction have triumphed in recent years through the wide-scale acceptance of national politics as a form of entertainment. This acceptance has resulted from the simultaneous convergence of at least five distinct—but closely related and self-reinforcing—transformations in our culture. These transformations can be enumerated plainly. They include (a) the accentuated concentration of ownership in the media industries, with the ever more desperate competition to increase market share of the readership or viewership to sell “eyeballs” to corporate advertisers; (b) the rapid merging of news and entertainment businesses with the “Hollywoodization” of news content, the dumbing down of public affairs programming, the trivialization of investigative journalism, and the ascendancy of “reality TV”; (c) the well-financed and pervasive expansion of hate radio and shout television; (d) the growth of cable TV, e-mail news groups, the blogosphere, Web streaming, and podcasting—in short, narrowcasting—and the consequent decline in the dominance of broadcasting; and (e) the steady growth of celebrity politics whereby celebrities become politicians and political figures seek enduring recognition as celebrities.

Each of these cultural transformations deserves extended examination in its own right, but it is important to emphasize that all of these trends exist by virtue of each other. Collectively they serve to amplify and enhance one another.

This discussion centers on the last of these convergent transformations, focusing on the role of celebrity politics and the manner in which this phenomenon has consolidated the politics of distraction in a repetitive “theater of the absurd.” As foreign commentators have frequently observed, President Bush appears on one stage after another to repeat stock phrases with no relation to reality. The remarkable fact is that the public has come to expect this kind of performance from their president. In fact, we have come to accept it without much comment because this is what we have been conditioned to expect from celebrities. This acceptance marks the triumph of the politics of distraction in America—something that may soon have disastrous consequences both for this country and the wider world.

## Celebrity and the Systemic Corruption of American Politics

It is useful to outline the larger context in which this process has come to pass. Every 4 years the American public is expected to render its collective judgment on the question of who its political leaders should be. Millions—perhaps billions—of dollars are spent during the 4-year electoral cycle to influence that choice; thus, among other things, it can be argued that the “free” elections in America are among the most expensive the world has ever witnessed.

With so much money changing hands, it is perhaps understandable that in the circle of political pundits, a great deal of attention is focused on campaign finance, special interest contributions, political action committees, and straightforward accusations of corruption in purchasing votes or rigging the voting process. There is, after all, a considerable amount of paper to trace in this regard. Campaign laws make some kind of disclosure inevitable. Thus, the obvious connections become apparent relatively soon. Yet armies of clever lawyers are constantly employed to figure out means to skirt or circumvent the laws, and so many months, perhaps years, are needed to unearth a more complete understanding of who really paid for the electoral process. Small wonder, then, that what passes for political commentary in the American media can easily become sidetracked from matters of substance. Like bloodhounds in pursuit of a red herring, American political commentators howl loudly when they sniff impropriety, and they think their job is done when they run to ground some hidden contributor or some elected official on the take.

All of this is useful and important in its own right, but it may prove to be beside the point. In their dogged pursuit of smelly political crooks, our country’s political watchdogs may have missed the far more subtle and pervasive form of corruption right underneath their noses. Indeed, for all of us, this kind of corruption is easy to miss precisely because it is as plain as the noses on our faces.

It is not only the blatant corruption of individual political figures that requires scrutiny but rather the more subtle, systemic corruption of the American political process that should command our attention. One major form of that corruption can be seen in the growing presence and ascendant influence of celebrities in American politics. As it has evolved with time, the celebrity political system is reciprocal: Celebrities are stepping in to the role of politicians and politicians are being packaged and presented increasingly as celebrities. As one recent study summarizes the situation,

The American political system has changed into a celebrity regime where politicians are subjected to Hollywood-style tabloid coverage and celebrities are treated as political actors. It is all part of the entertaining of America. No longer does the argument of whether pop culture influences political change or vice versa matter. Politics is pop culture. (West & Orman, 2002, p. x)<sup>2</sup>

It is worth reviewing the ways in which this came to pass. Initially, celebrities appeared as “sidekicks” to those in power. Often they would appear at political rallies to boost voter interest and financial support for aspiring candidates. Increasingly, how-

ever, these sidekicks came to function in a strangely different manner. Some celebrities from the realm of entertainment began to take on explicitly political roles. It was as though once they had learned to “act,” some of the entertainers began to act politically, taking on the added role in their repertoires of the “elected official.” People such as Ronald Reagan and Clint Eastwood or, more recently, Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger seem to have stepped into political careers as if government office required nothing more than mobilizing the “fans” at election time.

The electoral platform articulated by these actors/candidates was remarkably thin or patently vacuous, yet this did not seem to bother the voters. The reason for this was that by the time any of these figures ran for office, the corruption of the American political process was so thorough that it was invisible to most Americans.

It is important to emphasize that the issue of corruption lies not in the venal or wicked character of any of those who ran for office. Although some might dispute this blanket assertion, we can accept for the moment that all their characters and motives were as pure as the driven snow. For my analysis of the function of celebrity and the emergence of the politics of distraction, this is not particularly important. The essential point is that the source of fundamental corruption is grounded not in individual figures but rather in the system itself. The problem is that these candidates ran for political office not on any fully conceived or well articulated platform but rather simply *as celebrities*. This is both the source and the manifestation of the systemic corruption of American politics. After all, what are celebrities? And what do they have to do with politics?

As Boorstin (1961/1992) observed more than 40 years ago, “The celebrity is a person who is well known for his well-knownness” (p. 27). The tautology underscores the essence of the phenomenon. There need be no content whatsoever to celebrity. Indeed, there usually is none. Celebrity is a highly crafted but essentially manufactured product, emanating from what one observer has dubbed the “celebrity-industrial process” (Orth, 2004, p. 17; see part 1 and subsequent chapters as well); there need be no substance at its core. In the case of entertainment-celebrities-turned-politicians, celebrity candidates sought electoral support principally on the basis of identities crafted for them as actors assuming the roles of fictitious characters. It is as if in their rapturous adulation, the fans have become subject to some mysterious spell. Although they are all potentially engaged citizens, in their bewitched frame of mind, fans vote not so much for political leadership but rather for celebrity itself—the “image” of a leader. In such an enchanted state, as Boorstin foresaw, “vivid image came to overshadow pale reality” (p. 13).

By the 1980s, no serious critique of the fact that celebrities were presenting themselves as politicians could be sustained for long because most citizens had come to accept that politics had become a form of entertainment—a fantasy world in which an array of picture-perfect bodies and painted faces were expected to repeat phrases crafted by nameless, behind-the-scenes scriptwriters expressly for a sequence of stage-managed pseudoevents, consisting largely of one photo-op after another.<sup>3</sup> Politics had become playacting. As Boorstin (1961/1992) noted shortly after the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates,

In the last half century a larger and larger portion of our experience, of what we read and see and hear, has come to consist of pseudo-events. We expect more of them and we are given more of them. They flood our consciousness. (p. 12)

This corruption occurred gradually—in fact, so gradually that it is perhaps impossible to point to a time “before” it all went wrong. Any choice of a point in the past when things “used to be” such and such and “ever since” they have gone south is necessarily arbitrary. Pseudoevents with pseudoleadership are all we have come to expect in America. After all, by the time the movie star Reagan ran for president in 1980, he had already been elected as the governor of the state in which Hollywood and Disneyland were considered major “cultural” assets. In 1980, few commentators found Reagan’s political candidacy as a B-movie star outrageous or even odd.

In reality, the corruption of the American political process is coextensive with the evolution of political communications itself.<sup>4</sup> Whenever new means of political communication are exploited, the opportunity for corrupting the political process has presented itself. Those who historically have benefited from the new means have, quite naturally, portrayed it as an extension of democracy’s essential character. Those who have been victimized by these new means often cry foul and wail about the decline and fall of practically everything.

How, then, are we to make sense of this? What kinds of transformations in political communication are genuinely innovative and serve to invigorate the democratic process? Which function, on the contrary, to weaken it, deaden it, or kill it altogether? Is there any means to decide which is which? Does this not depend on what we mean by *democracy*? Ah, yes; perhaps this is the nub of the problem. What has democracy become in an age of ubiquitous entertainment? When TV shows are regularly “voted” on and political leaders seek anxiously to be interviewed on MTV, the *Larry King Show*, or late-night talk TV, what is the difference between political communication and entertainment? If there is no difference, what has become of democracy in the celebrity-industrial complex that envelopes us all? Can citizens any longer hope to become more than fans? If so, how?

These questions are admittedly large—too grand, in fact, to be answered in a satisfactory or systematic manner here. Nevertheless, we can gain some insight about both the emerging forms of celebrity politics and their significance in consolidating the politics of distraction by examining in detail how the Bush administration has sought to spin the global climate issue. Through these maneuvers, we can see how a core group of advisors and strategists have orchestrated a nonexistent debate during the course of several years, creating for the president a celebrity persona and a role to act out in stage-managed pseudoevents in which he would claim to promote “sound science” for “effective policy.” He then could appear to be doing something by calling for further “research,” all the while sidestepping any meaningful action to curb fossil fuel consumption. In the process, the public is alternately amused and confused, whereas Bush’s core supporters from the oil, coal, and extractive industries reap record profits; secure unparalleled, noncompetitive military contracts; and acquire unprecedented access to federal lands for future resource prospecting and extraction at public expense.

All of this is accomplished with no effective public opposition because it is happening offstage. Were glaring floodlights to shine on these corporate rip-offs, the public would be scandalized. In a similar manner, if Americans were to perceive clearly the costly and potentially disastrous shifts in climate that are likely to result from the carbon-intensive policies pursued by the Bush administration and its fossil fuel supporters, there would be public outrage. Citizens would demand that their government focus its efforts and their tax dollars on working cooperatively with the rest of the world's governments to engineer a safe and stable transition to a post-carbon-fueled world. But as it is, the politics of distraction have succeeded in shifting people's attention away from these sobering realities, diverting them instead to the sideshow that the national political arena has become.

### **The “Happy Hick”: The Construction of a Political Celebrity**

The only reason this theater of the absurd can continue is because the press and the public have resigned themselves to accepting politics as the equivalent of theater and Bush himself as a strange new kind of celebrity hero—the Happy Hick. Bush and his handlers have created and cultivated this stage persona to assure the repeated success of the ongoing politics of distraction.

Crafting this role for Bush was an obvious choice for Karl Rove and Karen Hughes. After all, Bush himself regarded Reagan as his mentor and “hero.” The extension was logical. Thus, we have a president embracing the image of a B-movie actor, seeking to model himself on a celluloid cowboy whose publicity machine had contrived to dub “the Great Communicator.” One generation removed, what we get in GW is a species of pseudocowboy who retreats frequently to a “ranch” in Texas but does not even ride a horse. Born in Connecticut, schooled at Andover and Yale, GW distinguished himself only as a cheerleader, a National Guardsman with a questionable record, a failed businessman, and the owner of a mediocre baseball franchise.

This is not normally the stuff of national leadership. But the facts did not seem to matter anymore in the eyes of a confused and hypnotized public. By evoking Reagan's celluloid ghost, the moviegoing public knew that it was expected to “suspend its disbelief” in watching the Bush act. After it was rehearsed at length in Texas, the Bush handlers felt that the “Ahh-Shucks-Cowboy” image was ready for the national campaign stage. With considerable help from the promotional wizards of Madison Avenue, the image of the Happy Hick—an inarticulate but good-natured, grinning cowboy—was implanted firmly in the public mind. The image is as phony as a three-dollar bill but as a genuine phony, GW matches the part. We all know he is not a cowboy. But we also do not want to confront the possibility that he may, in fact, be as dumb as he sounds, looks, and acts. So we settle for the notion that he is playacting the role of the Happy Hick. We would prefer to accept this mythical persona rather than confront the notion that it may be a reality.

For lack of any other qualities, this is the fictional image that GW and his handlers have adopted, perfected, and consistently presented for the scripted screenplay of pub-



lic appearances. With his rehearsed Texas drawl, nobody believes he actually is the cowboy he is trying to act, but no one cares because they have accepted the corny role as a simulacrum for leadership in a script they find distracting or even amusing. Perhaps the moviegoing public accepts it as a vague and wistful reminiscence of the simpler Reagan, B-movie era. All GW has to do is to step into this role and “to stay on message” with whatever script has been placed before him by his handlers for any chosen day.

Oddly enough, even when he fails to stay on message or strays dangerously into constructing a response to a question in his own words, none of the ensuing mistakes seem to have a lasting negative impact. In fact, the frequently observed and oft-reported verbal gaffs—if not actually staged—have turned out to be highly beneficial in reinforcing the hick cowboy image. Everyone laughs. Capturing and publishing collected “Bushisms” has become a modest industry in its own right, and this, too, serves to build the Happy Hick celebrity role. Only a few people are embarrassed. The reason why the numbers of the embarrassed are not greater than they are is that as fans, we Americans have come to the staged political events already prepared to suspend our disbelief, as we do customarily in watching movies or going to the theater. We have come to accept—perhaps even welcome—whatever distraction we can glean from what, on some deeper level, we all know to be growing ridicule in the world at large and a vague sense of impending doom.

By appearing again and again in the Happy Hick celebrity role that his handlers have created for him, Bush and his team have effectively reduced national politics to a sideshow. Nobody expects anything of substance from the president anymore, and sure enough they do not get it. He prevails in encounters with adversaries by winning what might be called “a contest of lowered expectations.” Whatever the occasion, no matter how badly Bush handles the scene, the audience compensates for his evident inadequacies with a series of excuses or remarks such as “Well it was better than it might have been,” or “You think this is bad? You should have seen the time when. . . .” Audiences accustomed to theater performances generally want onstage actors to succeed because they do not want the scene itself to fail or the entire play to be called a flop. The audience in this sense coconspires with the poor actor, compensating for an amateurish performance or blatant incompetence by suggesting that the play itself was nevertheless credible or that it had some redeeming moments. In addition, the televised political pundits who immediately follow any televised presidential statement with “discussion” among “experts” or seeming endless commentary strive to add further compensatory layers of meaning, lest the public remain troubled by the partial aspect of the president’s performance or the illogic of his statements.

Reactions to the politician/celebrity role may, to some extent, be limited to a particular generation. As Mindich (2005) has observed, those younger than 40 years old have for the most part ceased to follow the news altogether. Thus, during the Bush years, the younger generation is not really disillusioned with politics because they are too sophisticated to have had illusions in the first place. Among those who still do follow current events, their approach is decidedly more ironic toward the political celebrities they see parading before them. This becomes apparent in how they choose

to acquire their news. Many teenagers and young adults—perhaps, in fact, the majority—prefer to receive their news of national politics from *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central. They have long since given up hope of expecting truth from mainstream media, so they have settled for the Comedy Central sideshow. At least it is more amusing (see *The Daily Show* Web site at [http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the\\_daily\\_show/index.jhtml](http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_daily_show/index.jhtml)).<sup>5</sup> We could perhaps all laugh if the results were not so tragic and devastating in the world at large.

Well-staged distraction is, of course, precisely what best serves the interests of the petrochemical, resource extraction, manufacturing, and logistic support industries that brought Bush to power. Putting GW on a movable stage, making celebritylike “appearances” as the Happy Hick across the country, serves the purpose of keeping the sideshow going. Meanwhile, the Gang of Four—Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove, and Rice—continue to make all significant policy decisions behind the scenes with timid or nonexistent press coverage and little public scrutiny of any kind.

For example, the American public has never seen the detailed papers of Vice President Cheney’s energy task force—the group that helped formulate the administration’s energy policy. Many argue that the public has a right to know whose interests were listened to most closely as the administration drew up its energy plan. After all, this team of experts was paid for by taxpayers’ money. Should not the public have a right to know about the task force’s proceedings and conclusions? The secrecy surrounding these documents fuels the persistent question, What are Cheney and the energy lobby trying to hide?

In the absence of full disclosure, partial evidence and speculation are all that is available. It is perhaps for this reason that extended and detailed investigations are now beginning to suggest that the entire series of events surrounding 9/11 were part of a highly secret, coordinated, and stage-managed drama designed to keep the public scared and ignorant while at the same time whipping up public hatred against Arabs and Muslims to a fever pitch in a demand for “revenge.”

After 9/11, the Bush administration packaged its foreign policy message as a global “antiterrorist,” pro-democracy campaign. As more information is leaking out, however, about what intelligence was available before the tragedy of September 11, numerous analysts are pointing out that the Bush administration was discussing plans for an invasion of Iraq well before the tragic attacks of 9/11. From this perspective, the 9/11 event sequence appears to have been orchestrated as an elaborate part of the politics of distraction. These observations suggest that from the outset, the overarching intention of the Bush administration was to extend and consolidate American control of Middle Eastern and Caspian oil reserves (see Ruppert, 2004). Whether the attacks of 9/11 were part of the orchestrated event sequence or whether the stage managing began only after the 9/11 attacks is—in one sense—not centrally important to understanding how the politics of distraction have come to function in America. The public pronouncements about the meaning of these events and the motivation this reputed meaning supplied for official action constitute the real significance of this tragedy as a case study in the politics of distraction. According to some observers, the manipulation of public sentiment after the attacks amounted to “hijacking catastrophe”—a sys-

tematic effort on the part of the administration's public image handlers to capitalize on the fear, confusion, and the vague sense of a need for revenge to "sell" its policy of preemptive warfare, extending American empire and tightening its control over Middle Eastern oil reserves (Earp & Jahally, 2004).<sup>6</sup>

If 9/11 and its aftermath prove to be, on further examination, an elaborate example of the politics of distraction, it must be emphasized that this profound and extensive dissimulation was not simply the result of a few manipulative individuals working alone in secret. The fact is that it would be possible—or perhaps inevitable—only because of the historic and dramatic collapse of professional journalism standards in America in recent years. Simple techniques of investigative journalism and persistent questioning would have been sufficient to reveal to the public what was going on, if Americans had a lively, independent, and functioning press. The fact is, however, we no longer have any such thing.

Through corporate media concentration, facilitated since the Reagan years through the systematic deregulation of ownership rules, the news profession of journalism has become an "industry." Moreover, this industry has been purchased by and is now operated as a fully owned subsidiary of the entertainment business. With the Disney Corporation owning a major vehicle of news projection in America, is it any wonder that Mickey Mouse seems newsworthy and political reports look like they are filled with cartoon characters?

The simultaneous collapse of the news profession and the cutthroat competition between large corporations for the ever-increasing control of American entertainment media means that citizens are increasingly treated as fans in an escalating, self-delusional sequence of make-believe scenarios that appear absurd in the world at large but remain the subject of intense and fierce debate in what has become the sideshow of American political life. The tragedy is that these make-believe scenarios have such a devastating impact in the real world. The proposition that the Afghan people should be bombed and the country occupied because some members of an extremist movement lived in its hills was patently ridiculous as an idea to anyone who did not understand the "O.K. Corral" mentality of American leadership and its enchanted fans. The notion that Iraq constituted an imminent threat to the United States because of imagined weapons of mass destruction was similarly absurd to anyone outside the spell manufactured by Hollywood scriptwriters and foisted systematically on a bewildered public which was led to believe that it had a right for revenge in some movielike "showdown."

The delusions do not stop here. On virtually all environmental issues, there is a growing gap between the politician's representation of truth and the underlying realities of our common global circumstance. The climate issue in particular provides a striking example of this.

As a candidate for president in the 2000 campaign, Bush professed an interest in limiting carbon emissions; but shortly after assuming office in 2001, Bush and his supporters from the carbon industries sought ways to reposition climate change as "theory" rather than fact. Lobbyists for the fossil fuels industries paid scholars and consulting experts to appear throughout the country and on the national media to challenge the

findings of the international teams of scientists who had been carefully documenting global climate change since the late 1980s. The steps by which this was accomplished have been well documented by Gelbspan (1998, 2004), a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist, in *The Heat Is On* and *Boiling Point*.<sup>7</sup> Additional revealing reports, drawing on Gelbspan's pioneering work, have been undertaken as part of Bill Moyer's PBS program *NOW*; specifically, these include "Debating 'Global Warming'" (2005) and Gelbspan, Mooney, and Ebell (2005). What Gelbspan (2005a) referred to as a "massive campaign of deception and disinformation" is really, in his words, a form of "corruption masquerading as conservatism."

There have been immediate and disturbing consequences for the professional journalists that have sought to expose the corruption of the Bush administration's energy and climate policymaking. We now know, for example, that the Moyer's program, *NOW*, has been selected for particular surveillance and criticism by Kenneth Tomlinson, Bush's recent appointee as chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. On June 16, 2005, *Democracy Now* related that

*The New York Times* is reporting that investigators at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are examining more than \$14,000 in payments made under contract to a man who compiled reports on the political views and backgrounds of guests appearing on the PBS program *NOW* with Bill Moyers. The paper says that the corporation's Republican chairman, Kenneth Tomlinson, took the unusual step of signing the contracts personally. ("CPB Chair Tomlinson," 2005, para. 1)

Not able to counter the overwhelming evidence aired on *NOW* linking Bush's climate policy to the energy industry, Tomlinson is trying to dismantle the structure of public broadcasting itself, lest citizens become informed about these and other pressing issues from which the president and his backers have mobilized the politics of distraction to hide for so long.

The underlying problem is that collectively, after so many years of celebrities entering politics and politicians playacting constructed celebrity roles, Americans have lost the capacity to judge what constitutes truth. As Boorstin (1961/1992) has observed, in America we have experienced

the shift in common experience from an emphasis on "truth" to an emphasis on "credibility." All of us . . . all American citizen-consumers—are daily less interested in whether something is a fact than in whether it is convenient that it should be believed. . . . What seems important is not truth but verisimilitude. (p. 212)

Verisimilitude never asks, What is true? but rather, What *seems to be* true?—that is, What is *believable*? What is believable is, in turn, derived from what we expect to believe will come next in a preconceived plot or scenario. The American public has come to settle for what is believable in well-scripted fictions that have been crafted for their consumption by public relations operatives and the dominant news/entertainment corporations.

## Awaking From the Dream to Avert the Nightmare

At some point the American people may start to dislike the future that these pseudocowboys, fictitious celebrities, and public relations operatives have crafted for them. Despite the best efforts of Hollywood screenwriters and the news spinmeisters, world events and global ecological reality cannot simply be recast into a convenient movie script for their well-financed, hick heroes.

Concerning the climate change issues, for example, it has become apparent that many of the administration's most important science-based documents on climate were, in fact, heavily edited by Philip Cooney, a former lobbyist of the American Petroleum Institute who had come to work in the Bush administration as the chief of staff for the Council on Environmental Quality. Cooney is a lawyer with no training as a scientist, yet his rephrasing of scientific research passed for the administration's representation of reality until it was finally exposed. Cooney resigned "to spend more time with his family"—as the formula would have it—yet within days, we learn he is to take a job with Exxon Corporation.<sup>8</sup>

The transparency of the corruption and the complete phoniness of Bush's playacting as the Happy Hick became apparent to anyone who was watching the press conference that Bush held jointly with Tony Blair at the White House on Tuesday, June 7, 2005. On the same day that Cooney's role in doctoring the science was being detailed to the world in the morning edition of *The New York Times* (Revkin, 2005d), Bush himself stood up and continued to repeat the contention that his administration was committed to undertaking further research "to learn more about it [climate change]" (see the BBC clip of the press conference, "Bush on the Climate," 2005). In the evening news programs, American political commentators failed to underscore the irony of Bush's statements in light of the evidence revealed in the morning papers. No news program juxtaposed the president's speech with copies of the Cooney pencil-edited science reports.

Editorials on June 9 reflect some of the amazement that commentators began to feel as they assessed the impact of the Cooney story. As *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* summed it up, "The Bush team will always prefer 'let's pretend' to science about global warming" (as quoted in "Reality Is Not," 2005, para. 6). Their comment emphasizes how successful the playacting of the Happy Hick has been. Americans have come to expect their president and his team to play "let's pretend" with their future.

Eventually, and perhaps in the not too distant future, there will be real and costly consequences for the extended dream state of "let's pretend" that the American public has allowed its celebrity-leaders to cast as a spell on it. Boorstin (1961/1992) warned us decades ago that we were headed in the seriously wrong direction:

We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so "realistic" that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very house in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience. (p. 240).

Boorstin's (1961/1992) prescription for salvation from this syndrome of celebrity-induced illusion is for Americans to "wake up" from their dream state and begin to perceive the real world beyond that of their images: "We must first awake before we can walk in the right direction" (p. 261). Boorstin elaborated,

Each of us must disenchant himself, must moderate his expectations, must prepare himself to receive messages coming in from the outside. The first step is to begin to suspect that there may be a world out there, beyond our present or future power to image or imagine. (p. 260)

Boorstin went on to add in words that sound disturbingly prophetic in retrospect,

We should not worry over how to export more of the American images among which we live. We should not try to persuade others to share our illusions. We should try to reach outside our images. We should seek new ways of letting messages reach us; from our own past, from God, from the world which we may hate or think we hate. (p. 260)

Judging from events since September 11, Americans have learned very little from this advice penned nearly 45 years ago. The pseudoevent has taken center stage and celebrities reign supreme in American political consciousness. In fact, public service itself seems to be just an alternate path to celebrity in a world that has come to be governed by what Orth (2004) has called "the importance of being famous." Oli North and Newt Gingrich command significant speaker fees on the celebrity circuit. Because of their celebrity status, few people remember their illegal and immoral behavior or their systematic betrayal of the public trust while they were government employees. Meanwhile, Al Gore is as much sought after as a speaker for World Environment Day, and Bob Dole sustains his fame through his erectile dysfunction commercials.

GW himself flips into the Ahh-Shucks-Cowboy mode whenever he is confronted with a query of any substance—either by foreign leaders or by poorly socialized members of the press corps who have not kept to the appropriate pre-scripted questions. The obsequious press allows him to play this role because they think that is what the public has come to expect of him and of them. Reporters have become stenographers, faithfully recording the press releases issued to them by government spokespersons. All the while, the power to shape and control the public's illusions has passed into the hands of fewer and fewer corporations in whose interest it is to orchestrate national politics as a colorful sideshow, keeping the voting fans amused.

By diverting American public attention from what is being done in their name at the expense of future generations in this country and throughout the world, Bush and his fossil fuel supporters have proved to be masters of the politics of distraction. Yet both foreign and American scientists are speaking out unequivocally. As they point out, in America we must awake from the dream state that celebrity politicians have conspired with us as a moviegoing public to produce, if we are to have any hope of avoiding the impending global nightmare that our current carbon-intensive policies will inevitably engender. A new vision of the problem is needed, but in addition, new forms of politi-

cal communication are urgently required to mobilize the human community to work for its own survival.

## Notes

1. The concept of the politics of distraction was mentioned by Samwick (2004) in a highly suggestive, but tantalizingly short, insight published as an editorial/program profile. Samwick, director of the Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth, is an economist who is a specialist in social security reform. He served as the chief economist on President Bush's Council of Economic Advisors from 2003 to 2005. His comments imply a certain level of frustration with what he termed the politics of distraction during the 2004 election cycle because, as practiced by the press, they seem to prevent the public from making meaningful judgments on important issues that affect their lives. The sense in which the phrase is used in the present article is more extensive than Samwick's usage suggests. It is intended here to refer to a more or less conscious strategy pursued by those in politics who wish to accomplish their essential goals without excessive press scrutiny or any public awareness whatsoever. Skillfully pursuing the politics of distraction has allowed Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, for example, to craft an image of a maladroit, pseudo-Texan for the president, which has served to keep the public amused and the mainstream press diverted from the activities of Vice President Cheney and the neocons.

2. West and Orman's (2002) short study provides a convenient synthesis of the trends in American politics and a useful typology of different types of "celebrity politicians" (p. 2).

3. The characteristics of a pseudoevent are discussed at length by Boorstin (1961/1992), including its key attributes:

(1) It is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. . . . (2) It is planted primarily . . . for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. . . . (3) Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. . . . (4) Usually it is intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. (pp. 11-12)

4. As Boorstin (1961/1992) wryly observed, "A full explanation of the origin and rise of pseudo-events would be nothing less than a history of modern America" (p. 12).

5. In the fall semester of 2004, incoming freshmen students taking a course titled *News From Nowhere: Locating Truth in the Internet Age* at Emerson College in Boston systematically expressed indifference to the mainstream media news channels and a marked preference for obtaining their news from *The Daily Show* (see course description at <http://pages.emerson.edu/courses/Fall04/IN123b/>).

6. See as well the DVD version of this perspective available from <http://www.hijackingcatastrophe.org/>. ]

7. The full titles of these books convey more accurately the dimensions of the problem. In addition, see the recent study published in a special issue of *Mother Jones* titled "While the World Burns," particularly Gelbspan (2005b) and Mooney (2005).

8. For the news accounts of this "scandal," see Revkin (2005a), Blakely and Nugent (2005), "Report: Official Edited Warming" (2005), "Bush Aide 'Edited Climate Papers'" (2005), and "White House Environmental Chief Cooney Watered Down Climate Reports" (2005). The initial stories were circulated about Cooney's editing practices on June 7. On June 9, *The New York Times* carried an editorial on the subject ("A (White) House Party," 2005). By June 10, Cooney had resigned, and on June 15, Revkin (2005c) reported that Cooney was to take a position with Exxon (see also Revkin, 2005a, 2005b).

## References

- A (White) house party for lobbyists [Editorial]. (2005, June 9). *The New York Times*, p. A26.
- Blakely, R., & Nugent, H. (2005, June 8). Whitewash at the White House? *The Times Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,1072-1645867,00.html>

- Boorstin, D. J. (1992). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage. (Original work published in 1961)
- Bush aide "edited climate papers." (2005, June 9). *BBC News Online*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4075986.stm>
- Bush on the climate. (2005, June 7). *BBC News Online*. Retrieved from [rtsp://tmv8.bbc.net.uk:554/news/media/avdb/news\\_web/video/9012da6800102a8/nb/09012da680010532\\_16x9\\_nhrm?start=21:20.8](rtsp://tmv8.bbc.net.uk:554/news/media/avdb/news_web/video/9012da6800102a8/nb/09012da680010532_16x9_nhrm?start=21:20.8)
- CPB Chair Tomlinson personally ordered monitoring of Moyer's "NOW." (2005, June 16). *Democracy Now*. Retrieved from <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/06/16/1355255>
- Debating "global warming." (2005, April 22). *NOW*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/now/science/climatedebate.html>
- Earp, J., & Jahally, S. (2004). *Hijacking catastrophe: 9/11, fear and the selling of American empire*. New York: Interlink.
- Gelbspan, R. (1998). *The heat is on: The climate crisis, the cover-up, the prescription* (Rev. ed.). Reading, MA: Perseus Books.
- Gelbspan, R. (2004). *Boiling point: How politicians, big oil and coal, journalists and activists are fueling the climate crisis—And what we can do to avert disaster*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gelbspan, R. (2005a, May 10). *Denial, resistance and the hidden promise embedded in the climate crisis: Harvard University Extension School—Global climate change: The science, social impact and diplomacy of a world environmental crisis*. Retrieved from <http://www.climate-talks.net/2005-ENVRE130/Class/RR-WK-14-set.htm>
- Gelbspan, R. (2005b, May/June). Snowed. *Mother Jones Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2005/05/snowed.html>
- Gelbspan, R., Mooney, C., & Ebell, M. (2005, April 22). Report: ExxonMobil spends millions funding global warming skeptics. *Democracy Now*. Retrieved from <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/04/22/1338256>
- Kolbert, E. (2005, May 9). The climate of man—III: What can be done? *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from [http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/050509fa\\_fact3](http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/050509fa_fact3)
- Lean, G. (2005, February 6). Apocalypse now: How mankind is sleepwalking to the end of the earth: Floods, storms and droughts. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/environment/article13813.ece>
- Mindich, D. T. Z. (2005). *Tuned out: Why Americans under 40 don't follow the news*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mooney, C. (2005, May/June). Some like it hot. *Mother Jones Magazine*. Retrieved from [http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2005/05/some\\_like\\_it\\_hot.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2005/05/some_like_it_hot.html)
- Orth, M. (2004). *The importance of being famous*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Reality is not so easily refuted. (2005, June 14). *The Guardian Unlimited*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,1503224,00.html>
- Report: Official edited warming: White House lawyer once worked for American Petroleum Institute. (2005, June 8). *MSNBC.Com*. Retrieved from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8137646/>
- Revkin, A. C. (2005a, June 20). Bush's environment chief: From the oil lobby to the White House to ExxonMobil. *Democracy Now*. Retrieved from <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/06/20/1328225>
- Revkin, A. C. (2005b, June 10). Editor of climate reports resigns. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/10/politics/11cooney.long.html?pagewanted=print&oref=login>
- Revkin, A. C. (2005c, June 15). Ex-Bush aide who edited climate reports to join ExxonMobil. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/tnt.html?tntget=2005/06/15/science/14cnd-climate.html&tntemail0=&emc=tnt&pagewanted=print>
- Revkin, A. C. (2005d, June 7). Official played down emissions' links to global warming. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/07/science/07cnd-climate.html?hp&ex=1118203200&en=494354b6393298f4&ei=5094&partner=homepage>
- Ruppert, M. C. (2004). *Crossing the Rubicon: The decline of the American empire at the end of the age of oil*. New York: New Society Publishers.



- Samwick, A. A. (2004, Fall). "The Direct Line" [Editorial]. *Rockefeller Center Newsletter*, 10(2), 5. Retrieved from <http://rockefeller.dartmouth.edu/assets/pdf/newsletterf04.pdf>
- Union of Concerned Scientists. (1992). *World scientists' warning to humanity*. Retrieved from <http://www.ucsusa.org/ucs/about/page.cfm?pageID=1009>
- West, D. M., & Orman, J. M. (2002). *Celebrity politics*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- White House Environmental Chief Cooney watered down climate reports. (2005, June 9). *Democracy Now*. Retrieved from <http://play.rbn.com/?url=demnow/demnow/demand/2005/june/video/dnB20050609a.rm&proto=rtsp&start=27:24&end=46:12.6>

**Timothy C. Weiskel** was a classmate of President George W. Bush at Yale University. On graduation, he was trained as a social anthropologist and a historian as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford, England. His research focuses on cultural belief systems and how they succeed or fail in enabling people to perceive and respond to social and environmental change. He currently teaches online courses on global climate change and environmental ethics at Harvard University's Extension School.