

# IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences

27<sup>th</sup>  
year

840,000 subscribers

## The High Priests of Journalism Truth, Morality, and the Media

Richard Lowry  
Editor-in-Chief, National Review

**W**hile an undergraduate at the University of Virginia, Richard Lowry edited a conservative monthly, the *Virginia Advocate*. After graduation, he worked as a research assistant for the nationally syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer and as a reporter for the *Connection* newspapers, a chain of suburban weeklies in northern Virginia.



Mr. Lowry was invited to join the staff of *National Review* in 1992 after finishing second in its young writers contest. He quickly rose through the ranks as a writer, articles editor, and congressional correspondent. In 1997, at age 29, he was named editor-in-chief. ♣

*At a February seminar, "The Fourth Estate," Richard Lowry charged the modern media with demonizing moral authority figures and casting doubt on notions of truth and objectivity.*

*This program was hosted by Hillsdale College's Center for Constructive Alternatives and newly established Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism.*

**M**ost journalists are professionals, worried more than anything else with beating the competition. But willingly or not, they are also part of a media establishment that has attitudes and values that seep into its coverage the way cigarette smoke at a bar gets into everything you wear; it doesn't matter whether you smoke or not, you stink.

This establishment at least implicitly reinforces the radical side in America's culture wars. What do I mean by the "radical side"? I am referring to those intellectuals on the Left who are attempting to remold American society and the way we view ourselves as human beings in keeping with an extreme feminist and multicultural world view. To illustrate what is at stake, let us go a little far afield and examine the hot new discipline of evolutionary biology. Evolutionary biologists look to our human and animal ancestors for clues as to what survival strategies and innate dispositions shape who we are now. In their way, they are engaged in the battle over human nature and its meaning.

Not so long ago, scientists used to disappear into the jungle to study tribes of natives, apes, and monkeys. You will see them in old documentaries on the Nature Channel wearing rumpled khakis, anxiously peering through binoculars at their unwary subjects. What many of them concluded was that violence and warfare were unknown among primitive humans, which supposedly proves that human nature is malleable and ultimately pacific. Only our corrupt, patriarchal, and repressive civilization accounts for violence and the other depredations of modern society.

As it turns out, this is bunk. Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist who did so much to popularize such a view, turns out either to have deliberately falsified her evidence or to have been fooled by her supposedly guileless subjects. Actually, as any reasonable person might expect, primitive societies were much more violent than civilized ones. And apes and monkeys, as we now know, beat up on one another as brutally as competing hordes of British soccer fans.

So much for the pacific theory. But as Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson observe in their biological study, *Demonic Males*, there is one exception. Among the chimpanzees known as the "Bonobos" there is no observable violent behavior. There are several other characteristics that also set this little group apart: They live in a matriarchal society in which the females lord it over the passive and easily manipulated males; free love reigns since the Bonobos are not loyal to their mates and will have sex at the slightest instigation; the females are bisexual; and all the chimps, male and female, are vegetarians.

Review this list carefully, and you are bound to conclude that it is a perfect description of the ideal liberal society. In fact, it is probably a pretty good description of life at, say, Brown University.

## Demearing Facts

There is a strange moral inversion in the land. Smoking in the White House is strictly forbidden. It is an unacceptable social, indeed, even moral offense. But other activities—including those that puzzle journalists like Barbara Walters—are shrugged off as a healthy president's way of blowing off steam or as

unfortunate personal excesses that are none of the public's business.

Another example: Politicians create intrusive new regulations in the name of protecting our kids' health while allowing schools to distribute condoms. *National Review's* Washington Editor Kate O'Beirne has quipped, "To get liberals upset about teenage sex, you would have to convince them that it is connected to teenage smoking afterward."

What is notable about the liberal agenda is that

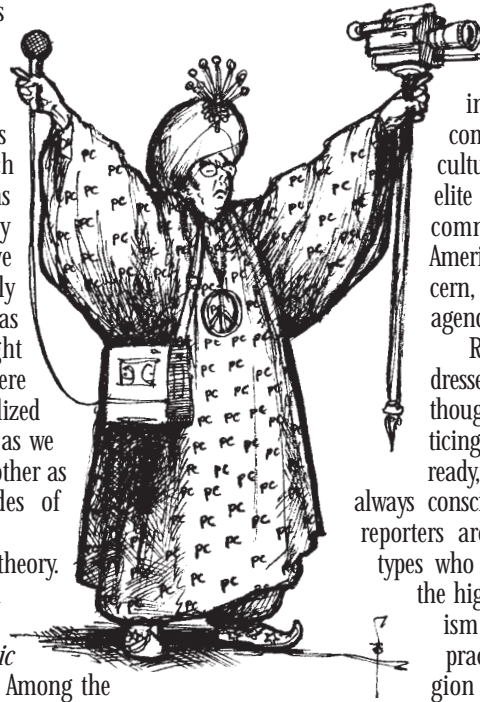
it is not—to use a word that used to get House Speaker Newt Gingrich in trouble—"normal." It comes from an academic, cultural, political, and media elite hostile to the mores and common sense of average Americans. My particular concern, of course, is how this agenda affects the media.

Reporters used to be ill-dressed, annoying types who thought of themselves as practicing a craft in a rough-and-ready, sometimes drunken, but always conscientious fashion. Today, reporters are ill-dressed, annoying types who think of themselves as the high priests of the journalism profession and who practice their secular religion in a relentlessly self-important and self-righteous fashion.

One recent study refers to reporters as "super-zippies." As a class, most journalists share the attitudes and values of the guests at the average Manhattan dinner party. Of course, they vote Democratic. According to one 1992 survey, 90 percent of Washington journalists voted for Bill Clinton. Ninety percent! Among journalists, then, George Bush won about as much of the vote as someone would running against Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in the old Soviet Union.

And the problems go much deeper. A lot of journalists—thanks to their education in fancy journalism programs and journalism schools—have absorbed such trendy post-modern notions as, "There is no objective truth."

*U.S. News & World Report* columnist John Leo recalls being hissed and booed at one journalism conference when he mentioned the need for objectivity. His experience is not uncommon. Hostility toward truth is extremely convenient for reporters because it frees them from the deadening and demearing task of transmitting facts. Actually, facts themselves are demearing as merely subjective interpretations of reality—unless, of



course, we are talking about the alleged “facts” of global warming, breast implants, or gun control.

## Demonizing Moral Authority Figures

**I**t is no wonder that many journalists distrust and dislike individuals who stand up for truth and who strive to uphold ethical and legal standards that are based on moral absolutes. Bill Clinton has had his share of negative press. Quite a few Washington reporters have grown tired of being played for fools or are out to “kill the king.” But Clinton was outpaced in unfavorable news coverage by his nemesis, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

When he agreed to take the job five years ago, Starr probably expected some White House stonewalling and some flak from congressional Democrats. But surely he never dreamed of the rabid hostility he would encounter from the media, which has managed to portray him as both a religious zealot and a sexual obsessive.

Starr has never lied under oath and has never fooled around with young interns. Yet he is regularly ridiculed for such offenses as singing hymns—not even singing hymns badly, just singing hymns. His character is painted as black as the Hole of Calcutta. He is ruthless, unethical, strange, unhealthy, all for conducting an investigation aimed at discovering the truth.

Starr was also pilloried for allegedly violating Clinton’s privacy. This is an interesting and murky area. The media itself once had a high regard for privacy. Certain things were just off limits. In a famous incident after her husband lost the 1960 presidential election, Pat Nixon confronted a couple of reporters who had shown up on the steps of her California home for day-after reaction. She was furious and launched into a long, unhinged tirade, doubtless fueled by the stress and disappointment of her husband’s narrow loss. The reporters retreated and didn’t write a word about it. They considered it out of bounds; Pat Nixon was venting her personal grief, and there was no reason to broadcast it to the world.

Today, is there any doubt that Pat Nixon’s outburst would have led every evening news show? *Nothing* is off limits, from *Baywatch* star Pamela Lee Anderson’s breast implants to the grief of high school students in Littleton, Colorado

(some of whom called TV stations before 911). Which brings us back to Ken Starr.

Violating the president’s privacy certainly bothered the press, but not all that much. Sexual harassment law with which it sympathized made possible the Paula Jones suit that precipitated the investigation. And the press violates people’s privacy every day. No, the problem was that the subtext behind Starr’s investigation was that Clinton had done something *wrong* in his private life (as if anything done in the Oval Office can be private anyway) and that the public could make a judgment about his wrongdoing, and act accordingly, i.e., impeach and convict him.

It is judgment that really bothers the media. And here we arrive at a deeper, more disturbing trend.

Unfortunately, this attitude is no longer confined just to the media or to other elites.

One of the more important books published in the last year is *One Nation, After All* by sociologist Alan Wolfe. In this penetrating analysis of the middle class, Wolfe demonstrates that most Americans lead responsible, morally upright lives, but that they are extremely reluctant to make moral judgments about other people. They are also reluctant to rely upon their private beliefs as the basis for their opinions about public life.

Value-free tolerance is fast becoming America’s civil religion. The media plays to and reinforces this tendency in its depiction of religious leaders ranging from Pat Robertson to Pope John Paul II. Their beliefs may or may not be portrayed in a positive way, but their efforts to apply their beliefs to such social issues as premarital and extramarital sex, homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia are considered bizarre and dangerous.

Another media tendency plays into this trend: It loves to expose hypocrites. This means targeting public figures who uphold moral standards.

Conveniently, all of the people exposed in the most recent round of the Clinton scandal-related “outings” happen to be such social conservatives as Dan Burton, Helen Chenoweth, and Henry Hyde. The only way to be safe in the current environment is to be Larry Flynt, who is guilty of every offense but hypocrisy, a swine who makes no effort to lift his snout from the muck toward something higher.

Today, reporters are ill-dressed annoying types who think of themselves as the high priests of the journalism profession . . .

## Avoiding Judgments

Moreover, there is a general trend toward sentimentality and compassion in the media. Feelings are constantly elevated over reason, compassion and good intentions over sterner virtues like duty and honor. Clinton's empathy is the subject of lengthy magazine articles. Sportscasters cut their coverage of athletic events short in order to spend more air time on the personal trials and tribulations of the contenders. Television news networks reserve large chunks of air time for "soft" features that go beyond the general level of human interest.

This helps create an atmosphere in which it is difficult to make sound moral judgments. Here is a case in point: In a recent *Wall Street Journal* focus group, two women, asked to resolve a contradiction between their condemnation of Clinton's perjury and their belief that he shouldn't be impeached, broke down in tears and left the room. Many people reacted to the Clinton scandal in a similar way: They didn't want to confront it; they didn't want to judge or to have to choose between their conflicting impulses.

Then, there is the matter of race and gender. The media pushes a kind of politically correct caste system of racial and gender identity.

Metropolitan newspapers are the worst institutions in the country when it comes to imposing quotas; many not only set goals for hiring but also follow the *Los Angeles Times'* example of setting quotas for sources, and they never pass up a

chance to run features on the so-called "gender gap" and "hate crimes."

The gender gap, of course, isn't a one-way street. Republicans attract fewer female voters, and Democrats attract fewer male voters. But the votes of men are considered less valuable. Look at the major news stories about Clinton's impeachment. Almost all of them pointed out time and time again that the House managers were white males, which perforce made their arguments suspect. Meanwhile, Clinton's attorney Cheryl Mills and secretary Betty Currie were assumed to be the repositories of a kind of unerring virtue based solely on their race and gender. Again, we are dealing here with a postmodern notion that there is no objective truth apart from identity politics.

All of this makes for a dismaying picture. Remedying the problems of the modern media requires a long-term overhaul, not just of the press but of the wider culture. A couple of places to start: getting more conservatives in journalism, which means supporting projects such as Hillsdale College's Dow Program in American Journalism; exercising eternal vigilance against media bias, as Brent Bozell's very effective Media Research Center does; strengthening institutions that work to change the prevailing culture, from the *National Review* Institute to conservative institutions in higher education. Nothing, of course, will change immediately, but it will change—and that is worth remembering every time we tune in to the news to find out what is happening in our world. ▲

Dear *Imprimis* Readers,



Our goal is to reach one million subscribers by the end of 2000. You can help by sending names and addresses of family, friends, and associates. Please remember that subscriptions are free upon request.

For 27 years, Hillsdale College has sought through *Imprimis* to expand its educational mission beyond the borders of its southern Michigan campus to a national audience. This is one of the reasons that President Reagan once remarked that Hillsdale College "casts such a long shadow."

We hope that you feel the same way and that you will continue to find *Imprimis* helpful and informative.

All my best,

*Deane Roche*

### *Imprimis* Endowment Acknowledgments



Our thanks to Gene and Carol LaSchober of Georgia and the Castle Rock Foundation of Colorado for generously supporting *Imprimis*. Their major endowed gifts help us reach thousands of new subscribers each year.



# “The Fourth Estate”:



◀ *Hank Dow of Dallas, Texas, discussed his family's vision for a new journalism program at Hillsdale.*



▲ *Syndicated radio host Michael Medved suggested that much of what passes for “news” today is really “infotainment.”*



◀ *James Evans, who wrote Back to the Future: Reclaiming America's Constitutional Heritage, warned the public about common media myths.*

✓ Boxes for More Information:

- On-campus seminars of Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives
- Off-campus seminars of Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership
- Admissions
- Athletics
- Gift and Estate Planning or Hillsdale Hostel
- Freedom Library books and tapes
- Hillsdale Academy Reference Guide*
- Dow Leadership Development Center

Enclosed is my tax deductible contribution to Hillsdale College for: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Do you know students interested in admission to Hillsdale College?

We'll lend them a video at no cost! To order "Hillsdale College Video Visit," call 800/255-0384.

*(Orders only please-not an information line.)*



IMPRIMIS: (1-10 copies \$.75 each  
25-\$10 50-\$15 100-\$25)

Qty.	Author/Title	Price
Subtotal		
Michigan residents, add 6% sales tax		
Total		

**FREE SHIPPING!**  
(Please make checks payable to Hillsdale College)

**Credit Card Donations/  
Orders Welcome!**  
VISA / MC / Discover

Expiration mo/yr																				

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

# Guaranteed Income Security

## HILLSDALE COLLEGE GIFT ANNUITIES

AGE	NEW RATE*
60 .....	7.8
65 .....	8.0
70 .....	8.6
75 .....	9.2
80 .....	10.2
85 .....	11.4
90 + .....	12.0

\* One-life rate.  
Two-life annuities are also  
available, at lower rates.

Are you one of the many Hillsdale College supporters who would like to receive guaranteed income in exchange for your gift?

If you are, we suggest you consider a Hillsdale College Gift Annuity. Now is the ideal time to participate, because Hillsdale College annuity rates are among the highest in the country.

Please call **800/334-8904** to request  
an information packet.



IMPRIMIS (im-pri-mis), taking its name from the Latin term "in the first place," is the monthly publication of Hillsdale College. Executive Editor, Ronald L. Trowbridge; Managing Editor, Lissa Roche; Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. Illustrations by Tom Curtis. The opinions expressed in IMPRIMIS may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its External Programs division. Copyright © 1999. Permission to reprint in whole or part is hereby granted, provided a version of the following credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College." **Subscription free upon request.** ISSN 0277-8432. IMPRIMIS trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Hillsdale College

# IMPRIMIS

VOLUME 28 • NUMBER 6

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to IMPRIMIS  
Hillsdale College  
33 East College Street  
Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

Changing address? Please use the enclosed  
prepaid envelope or telephone (800/437-2268)  
or e-mail <imprimis@hillsdale.edu>.

PRINTED MATTER

6/99

