

Reassessing Democracy: A Rebel's Guide

Gregory Shafer

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dedication: To Bernie, my best friend and inspiration

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Introduction

America in 2004 is not nearly as democratic or as free as its citizens believe. Rather, it is driven by powerful transnational corporations, which use newspapers, radio, and television to mold public opinion and control dissent. Americans have long been told that they are beneficiaries of a free press and competitive news culture, but much of what we read, hear, and see is orchestrated to meet the needs of corporations that own newspapers and television networks. In essence, corporations work with government to tell people what they want and how they should act and then sell this culture to them in glitzy advertisements and cultural fashions. In the 1950s, June Cleaver stayed at home and radiated the image of the model domestic housewife—someone who deferred difficult decisions to her husband Ward as she prepared nutritious meals. For Americans coming out of a war, it was a T.V. portrait that seemed congruent with the notion of post-war bliss and order. Such programs helped steer women back to the kitchen after being asked to work in factories to support the war.

Today when we turn on the television, we get an image of society that is consonant with what the executives at Disney, AOL/Time/Warner, News Corp, or Viacom want us to see. When we read a newspaper, we are given the news that will please powerful elites and perpetuate the status quo. Consequently, when

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marginal voices aspire to reveal the ugly, unjust, or hypocritical in their nation, they are quickly silenced. Michael Parenti might best capture this phenomenon when he writes, "Our free and independent news media are actually controlled by publishers and network bosses who see to it that their own preferred views prevail" (146).

Popular talk show host Bill Maher had his show cancelled by ABC because he was too provocative, too irreverent. After posing blunt questions about America and its culpability in its war on terrorism, he was replaced with more of the same self-important bluster that Americans have come to believe is investigative journalism. When independent journalists sought to articulate their outrage over the carnage in Iraq—and the incredible waves of propaganda that were washing over the public and being obediently printed by the press—they were fired or relegated to the margins. What happened, for instance, to Phil Donahue's nightly talk show, which aired during the fractious debate about the War in Iraq? What happened to the other voices of opposition and why did it take several months for the press simply to question our reasons for going to war? Why did CBS news anchor Dan Rather pledge his support for President Bush not long after the war with Iraq started? Is it not the role of the journalist to question wars that are declared without provocation and based on vague suppositions about weapons of mass destruction?

Today, Americans are ignorantly blissful, inebriated on long swigs of corporate propaganda. They are patriotic because they have been pelted with an unremitting deluge of positive national images, many emanating from the President and the conservative commentators who want people to be happy with his administration. The Dixie Chicks learned the hard way about the limits of American freedom. So too did those who thought they had the

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right to vote on gun control laws in Michigan and those who believed that people—not judges—should choose the President of the United States. And through it all, we keep waving our flags, telling ourselves that we are a blessed nation, and that we derive our power from pride. It is hegemony at its finest—a glittering spectacle of forgotten violations, quickly glossed over with a patriotic veneer.

Media, as a ubiquitous entity, is irrepressible but it is not the only way that Americans lose their right to democratic freedom. In our educational system and in our ability to eat sanitary meat, Americans are hearing and saying only what big business permits. In Colorado, citizens can be jailed for impugning the integrity of the meat they eat, because of food disparagement laws that are alive in over a dozen states. In school, the voices of minorities are being silenced by the din of political action, which has conveniently supplanted debate with national testing. What better way to standardize the curriculum—and the student body—than to replace local control with national standards? As President Bush pushes a standardized test curriculum around our nation, notions of what is acceptable become more conflated, more sanitized. In many ways, it is no longer necessary to think but only to listen and act passively. And so, Americans watch as their President gives tax breaks to the wealthy while thrusting them into a war that clearly was predicated upon lies, distortion, and fear. Such actions, of course, are taken by a president who was never elected by a majority of Americans in the first place.

Slowly, the vice is closing around Americans and the result is a nation that acts in predictable and mechanistic ways. Consider how obediently the country responded to the war in Iraq. While all around the world people condemned the attack of the oil-rich country, Americans were quick to believe the dubious hype about weapons of mass destruction and threats

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of terrorism. Never mind the lack of evidence. Never mind the failure of Americans to foster democracy in a plethora of other nations where they sought to “liberate” their citizens. With the media and many of our politicians repeating the mantra of fear and retaliation, most were quick to join the chorus. For those who didn’t, there were destroyed Dixie Chicks CDs to intimidate and remind.

This work explores these abrogations—these violations—of democracy. While they will never be discussed on the Sunday news programs—where the corporations control the flow and content of the information—they can be unveiled by those who aspire to make America the great country it constantly boasts it is. Indeed, before we can be a true democracy, we must be able to access both sides of a story and make decisions based on facts rather than selective information.

“We know through painful experience,” wrote Martin Luther King, “that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed” (11). This book offers clear and disquieting facts about how America is not the mecca of freedom and democracy that it often boasts it is. It challenges readers to rise from apathy and question laws, rules, and authority. “We should never forget that everything Adolph Hitler did in Germany was legal,” adds King. At the same time, “it was illegal to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so,” he concludes “I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers” (15). Democracy and freedom are predicated upon our ability to identify and change injustice. It begins with a fundamental ability to reassess our national liberty, to challenge traditional wisdom, and to demand more from the country we love.

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Chapter One

Lessons from The 2003 War on Iraq

Unpopular during even the happiest of stock-market booms, in time of war dissent attracts the attention of the police. The parade marshals regard any wandering away from the line as unpatriotic and disloyal.

—Lewis Lapham

Something unsettling happened as American bombs began to rain down on Baghdad during the 2003 war on Iraq. Where before there was a healthy and quintessentially democratic debate on the morality of bombing a nation because it might harbor terrorists and have weapons of mass destruction, suddenly there was an uneasy silence, as Americans were told to behave and support their President. For a nation that boasted the right to liberate Iraq and bring American values to this repressive part of the world, this bit of polite censorship was ironic and contradictory. Hours after singer Natalie Maines of the popular singing group the Dixie Chicks suggested that she was embarrassed by her President's actions in Iraq, patriotic Americans did not defend her right to speak but began destroying Dixie Chicks C.D.s, while station managers refused to play their songs on the

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radio. One week earlier, a New York man was harassed, asked to leave a mall, and then arrested for donning an anti-war T-shirt, and across the nation, people warily removed anti-war stickers from their cars in fear of vandalism. And so, without ever being officially censored, Americans began to feel pressured to support their troops and cease with the skepticism about the war. Radio D.J.s announced with incredible constancy that it was time to stand behind our fighting soldiers and be "good Americans." For many, it was no longer patriotic to question the bombing and bloodshed of an international conflict, as fealty replaced undiluted American expression.

Through it all, as "smart bombs" continued to fire the streets around innocent Iraqi denizens, other revelations began to stir unrest and suspicion among Americans. Was this really a war to end terrorism or was it about imperialism and transnational profits? While the President ignored the intrepid minority who continued to march in protest, a precious few news magazines uncovered disconcerting contradictions about this so-called war for democracy. Many wondered why Iraq was suddenly so dangerous and such an imminent threat to the United States when there was virtually no talk of "liberating" it during the 2000 Presidential election. Was this not the same nation that was bombed into submission just ten years earlier, and was this not the nation that had been dealing with sanctions and constant inspections by a United Nations team? Was this a war to end terror or was it more about the font of oil that flowed under the Iraqi sand? And finally, was it about a President and Vice President who wanted peace or a piece of the action?

Fundamental to a successful democracy is the ability of the people to be given honest and accurate information about their government and the actions that government takes on their behalf. Americans

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cannot participate in a democracy if they are only fed a steady diet of propaganda and mendacity, leading them to believe what is not true or only part of a larger story. At the same time, to be truly free, Americans must be able to reject the policies of their President and practice civil disobedience when they see nefarious policies coming to fruition and hurting others. This was the centerpiece of Thoreau's night in a Concord jail and his essay on "Civil Disobedience." This, we must remember, is the essence of a real, robust republic—one that is governed for and by the people. And yet, as the first week of the war passed in a blaze of explosions and death—with twelve British and American soldiers dying in a helicopter crash—Americans felt increasingly pressured to decide between supporting the war and being depicted as un-American.

Democracy, we must always remember, is never a stable and fixed entity. As with any dynamic, it is the product of tenacious struggle and unremitting pursuit. African Americans were not granted their right to emancipation but had to win it through the crucible of a Civil War and another century of civil disobedience in the streets of the South and Urban North. The right to vote was denied to women until their voices were heard in fractious speeches and aggressive political campaigns. Heroes of the era were not respected in their own time, because the prevailing wisdom suggested that it was not feminine or moral for ladies to march for suffrage or demand the right to decent contraception. Even today, few Americans know about the intrepid heroism of Margaret Sanger, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or Frederick Douglass. Progress, it seems, is almost never embraced during the time that it is proposed, so that few wanted a Civil War to emancipate Black people and even fewer saw any real utility in extending the right to vote to women. Entrenched power likes the status quo, or as Howard Zinn has written,

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“history is always crafted by those in power and reflects their prejudices and slanted perspectives” (Zinn).

Such was the case with the 2003 war with Iraq. As soon as President George W. Bush chose to ignore the United Nation’s recommendations—and the voices of millions of protesting Americans—to let inspections work, there was a dramatic change in the political terrain of the American landscape. Instead of being free to voice their dissent about a questionable war, many found that they were virtually forced to accept the conflict or be branded anti-military. Much like protesters during the Vietnam War, advocates for peace were increasingly given the moniker of apostates, of radical people who didn’t love their country—of people who didn’t appreciate the sacrifice of their soldiers. Morning talk radio—always a reflection of what is most sordid and lurid in the American psyche—trumpeted the might of American military and excoriated the “traders” and “cowards” who would rather protest war than stand behind their American troops. Pathetic jingles were created to lampoon Saddam Hussein and his imminent demise, while intellectually challenged D.J.s vilified those who refused to support the “American cause.” Gradually, the American right to dissent and disagree was evaporating like morning dew as stridency supplanted debate and war became the mantra for those in power.

Consider the example of Stephen Downs, who was arrested for wearing a t-shirt that had the innocuous mantra of “give peace a chance” and on the back “peace on earth.” When asked why Downs was arrested, Tim Kelley, the executive of the company that manages the mall, suggested that Downs was being “disruptive.” When pushed to define what he did to be depicted as “disruptive,” Kelly admitted that the expulsion from the mall had been prompted by the t-shirt. According to Leonard Pitts, in his *Miami*

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Herald article, Downs, who is a sixty year-old attorney, simply donned the t-shirt, talked to a few people in the food court, and then was asked to either remove the shirt or leave the mall. “When Downs refused,” writes Pitts, “the guards went away, only to return with police officers. They repeated the demand, he repeated his refusal, and Downs was arrested for trespassing” (Pitts B1, 3/10/03).

Writes Pitts, in his analysis of the situation, “there’s something chilling in the very act of Down’s arrest. Especially in light of local media reports that this isn’t the first time Crossgates has ejected shoppers wearing anti-war t-shirts” (1B).

What is perhaps most chilling about the arrest—and the swirl of raging patriotism—is that many Americans seem to have forgotten what is unique about their freedoms. When we burn a flag, march in protest, or wear a t-shirt that declares our contempt for a leader, we are engaging in acts that define us as a people that revere free expression, especially since these acts are often punished harshly in other countries. Our country becomes yet another repressive regime when we penalize the voices of the minority and try to squelch those who expose our nation’s peccadilloes. Our nation becomes little better than the countries we seek to “liberate” when we stifle dissent and stymie protest.

Some Americans have confused America as an abstract idea with America as a set of venerated and dynamic principles—ones that make our collective culture unique. Civil disobedience is not an action that should be outlawed but one that should be protected, encouraged, and inspired since it symbolizes expression and active engagement in the search for justice. Without dispute and rebellion, we become obedient machines, saluting a flag that ceases to epitomize the right to be free. Indeed, if we cannot safely express our opinions, to what, exactly, are we pledging allegiance?

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Again, one wonders what “good Americans” were thinking when they destroyed Dixie Chicks C.Ds, simply because Natalie Maines voiced her disapproval of President George W. Bush in March of 2003. Isn't the essence of our freedoms rooted in the right to express disapproval and to articulate the basis for that dispute? I was educated to believe that Americans were a restless, demanding people—people who would not brook injustice and who were quick to have their voices heard. People in America don't have their tongues chopped off for speaking their mind and deriding their President, as in other nations. But what does it say about us if our opinions are punished with destroyed C.Ds—C.D.s that represent the singer's livelihood? For some, it seems that iconoclasm is not American if it conflicts with their point of view.

Not surprisingly, it took Maines only days to capitulate to the American thought police and apologize for being “disrespectful” to her President. After days of being symbolically pummeled by irate Americans—and after seeing her sales plummet—she had been forced into an obsequious and compliant demeanor. In America during times of war, one begins to feel an aggressive brand of jingoism gradually supplanting our freedom to speak, which is why Americans must be forever vigilant in maintaining their right to question our government, while praying for those who are sent into dangerous conflicts. Wrote David Crumm in a March 19, 2003 *Detroit Free Press* article: “As U.S. forces head toward war, antiwar sentiments are butting up against the instinct to rally ‘round the flag.” And, he added, “Sometimes the collision can hurt” (1B).

Of course, America has always fancied itself to be a bastion of free speech. History, however, recalls a more sordid and checkered story. During World War I, hundreds of people were arrested for simply criticizing the war effort. In the Espionage Act of 1917, the

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United States effectively vitiated the first amendment rights of millions by appealing to the unrest and insecurity caused by the war. In essence this was a law that made it easier to silence political activists who saw the war as being fought by the working classes and who militated against it. Socialist leader Eugene Debs spent almost three years in jail for his impassioned anti-war speech—a conviction that was later upheld by the United States Supreme Court. Others, such as iconoclast Emma Goldman—who fought for birth control and labor rights—were arrested or intimidated for speaking against the war. In many ways, it seems clear that the law was not used to protect Americans but the interests of the entrenched power. Such, lamentably, is often the case when patriotism is used to usurp basic rights.

During the Second World War, celebrities had their livelihoods wrested away from them by being labeled communists. The blacklists, which made Joseph McCarthy infamous, were a feared and invidious symbol of what can happen when one challenges ensconced power. With the Smith Act of 1940, it became a crime even to organize or discuss the overthrow of the United States and its capitalistic system, leading to “one of the most sordid chapters in American history” (Chang 27). In each situation, we are reminded of the Dixie Chicks and the proclivity in America to react in despotic ways when people question national policy. They also continue to remind us that Americans are often not as free as they think they are—or they should be.

The Patriot Act and Civil Liberties

Patriotism is the last legal refuge of a scoundrel”

—Samuel Johnson

The blacklists, of course, were a generation ago, but today America has the Patriot Act, which seems to

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have the same chilling and paralyzing effect. Passed in the frenetic days after the September eleventh terrorist attacks, the law makes it easier to stifle dissent, creating a nation that is more tentative, more reticent, and less outspoken. Created as a response to terrorism, the Patriot Act permits the government to collect information about people who use the internet, whether it is for a library research paper or simply to engage in personal enlightenment. As an example, the act makes it easier for government officials to collect information about Web browsing and e-mail accounts without meaningful judicial review. Government officials can simply suggest that they are investigating possible terrorism and begin to use the Patriot Act as a ruse for government intimidation. "He's suppose to defend the constitution, not rewrite it," lamented the American Civil Liberties Union in decrying Attorney General John Ashcroft, the Patriot Act, and its potential for limiting rights.

Lamentably, the string of special rights granted to the F.B.I. is not limited to people's computers. It also "allows law enforcement agencies to search homes and offices without notifying the owner for days or weeks after, not only in terrorism cases, but in all cases—the so-called sneak and peak authority," (32) writes Karen Schneider in *Colorado Libraries*. "The Patriot Act," writes Schneider, "is not anti-terrorism legislation; it is anti-speech legislation. It was hustled into reality in the post-9/11 environment so quickly, secretively, and undemocratically that our Bill of Rights had been clocked with a one-two punch well before any of us realized it was under attack." (31).

In exploring the specifics of the Patriot Act, one can quickly appreciate Schneider's concern and the relevance it has to our nation's erosion of democracy. Where before there were constitutional protections in what one researched, wrote, and observed on the internet, there is now an easy way for government to

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intimidate those who might undermine its policies. If a teacher wants to explore the ways to protest an unjust war—as Thoreau did over a century ago—they could have their homes searched without prior notice. It becomes an easy way to thwart free expression, to scuttle the voices of those who are unhappy with government. In the end, it is yet another way that liberties become attenuated in what is supposed to be a free society. “Do you really think it helps democracy to put everyone in America under the lens of unbridled government surveillance?” (32) asks Schneider at the end of her article. Indeed, for many the answer is no.

Of course, there will always be those who wonder why anyone should worry—why essays should be written about the government’s long and sinewy arms of investigation. In America, we are told, we should trust our President and have faith in his actions. Such incredible innocence has been repeated several times as news programs do report after report on the heroism of American troops and the inherent goodness of removing Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction. In times of war, the mainstream media becomes a willing minion of the government, reverting to the role of glorified cheerleaders for the home team instead of probing critics for what is right.

As I write this, it is January, 2004. The war is over and has been supplanted by an uneasy peace-keeping mission—one that has resulted in daily violence against the soldiers that protesters tried to protect. Still, the nightly programs—and mainstream newspapers—have become little more than chroniclers for the daily travails of the marching soldiers. Gone from the discourse is the watching, observing eye of the critical press and meaningful interrogation as to why our President fabricated the dangers possessed by Saddam Hussein. Indeed, it was not until Howard Dean, a former Vermont governor and Presidential

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hopeful, began speaking against the war that people felt secure in opposing it. Since Dean's candidacy ended, the nation has been emboldened with new facts concerning the many distortions told by President Bush and his cronies. January 17, 2004, saw the 500th American die in the Iraq war and with it there were mounting questions as to why President Bush misled Americans in urging them to invade Iraq. Almost a year after Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell told Americans that they needed to attack Iraq so as to protect themselves from terror, there is clearly no link between the September eleventh attack and Saddam Hussein. In the same way, Colin Powell's argument before the United Nations that Iraq had stockpiles of weapons and was working to develop a sophisticated arsenal against American interests has been found to be a lie, a canard—a terrible hoax played upon the American people.

Earlier in the fall, Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts suggested that the case for the war in Iraq was a "fraud" and that much of the reasoning for the carnage was predicated upon "distortion, misrepresentation, a selection of intelligence to justify the case for war." According to Kennedy, "there was no imminent threat. This was made up in Texas, announced in January to the Republican leadership that war was going to take place and was going to be good politically. This whole thing was a fraud," (AOL News Online).

Kennedy's accusations have been supported in various circles, including the recent book by former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neil, who argued that Bush came into office with the goal of invading Iraq and using it for its physical and geographical treasures. According to O'Neil in his book *The Price of Loyalty*, Bush had an interest in Iraq that had little to do with weapons of mass destruction, as he later told the American people.

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And why not? Headlines after the start of the war discussed an interesting fact: President Bush's approval rating had jumped to over seventy percent. War, it seems, is often good for Presidents. It unites a nation and asks them to choose between their leader and the nemesis thousands of miles away. The question we must ask ourselves, however, is whether it is ethical for a President to use war—and the deaths of innocent and brave people—to plunder another country's oil or to bolster his political popularity. And without a curious and investigative media, how can our democracy ever expose this unpleasant possibility?

According to writer Eric Alterman of *The Nation*, President Bush has consistently lied about his motivation for attacking Iraq. In a recent article, Alterman suggests that Bush lied as a pretense for committing troops and used mendacity in exaggerating the nuclear capabilities of Saddam Hussein and his ability to launch missiles. "Most particularly," writes Alterman, "he has lied consistently about Iraq's nuclear capabilities as well as its missile-delivery capabilities" (10). The result, suggests Alterman, is that the nation will again dive into a war that will cost it lives and respect. Much like previous incursions in Viet Nam, it will subvert our democracy and exacerbate tensions around the world. Again, Alterman is provocative in his conclusion:

Reporters and editors who protect their readers and viewers from the truth about Bush's lies are doing the nation—and ultimately George W. Bush—no favors. Take a look at the names at that long black wall on the mall. Consider the tragic legacy of LBJ's failed presidency. Ask yourself just who is being served when the media

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allow Bush to lie, repeatedly, with impunity, in order to take the nation into war (10).

We must remember that the foundation of a democracy is rooted in the kind of information that Alterman discusses. We cannot make educated decisions about our lives if the nightly news does nothing more than describe military victories and provide a running death count. The nation cannot feel truly empowered if Dan Rather and Peter Jennings subscribe to the notion that it would make people too uncomfortable to hear the darker, more shadowy side of American foreign policy. Indeed, one wonders if major news organizations are thinking about mangled Dixie Chicks CDs when they decide to put a patriotic face on the war with Iraq. For, in the final analysis, they are profit-making enterprises.

Oil, Lies, and Oil

“A U.S. led ouster of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein could open a bonanza for U.S. oil companies long banished from Iraq, scuttling oil deals between Russia, France, and other countries and reshuffling world petroleum markets”

The Detroit Free Press

The failures of the media in investigating the untold story of the Iraqi war—and the American involvement in the Middle East—could also include questions of whether or not Bush and Cheney actually wanted to invade Afghanistan and Iraq long before terrorist attacks killed American civilians. According to Gore Vidal in *Dreaming War*, the oil company Unocal had

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already proposed a pipeline across much of Afghanistan in an attempt to develop the rich resources of the Caspian Sea. This was 1997 and the plan was to ignore the atrocities and repression of human rights—the abject misogyny—and use Afghanistan for its oil. However, when Osama bin Laden became a bigger player in the region, Vidal suggests that the nation turned its back on the Taliban and suddenly became interested in their violations of human rights and sought to overthrow their government. “By 1999,” writes Vidal, “it was clear that the Taliban could never provide the security we need to protect our fragile pipelines. The arrival of Osama as a warrior for Allah on the scene refocused, as it were, the bidding. New alliances were now being made” (42).

Vidal quotes Frederick Starr of Johns Hopkins in Starr’s 2000 *Washington Post* story: “The United States has quietly begun to align itself with those in the Russian government calling for military action against Afghanistan and has toyed with the idea of a new raid to wipe out Osama bin Laden” (42). And so, Vidal suggests, the attack on Afghanistan was not about ending terrorism but about solidifying the area for oil interests. Much of the same, Vidal adds, is happening in Iraq, where there is more oil than any country except Saudia Arabia.

A recent *Humanist* article contends that the ostensible war on terror is really about attacking the country so as to prevent them from disconcerting facts about how they obtained weapons of mass destruction. According to Michael Niman in his March/April essay, “when Iraq presented its weapons declaration to the United Nations in December 2002, the Bush administration immediately attacked the report as incomplete. . . . But that’s because the United States removed over 8000 pages of information from the 11,800 page document before passing it on. “The missing pages,” Niman argues, “implicated the