

Clowns and jokers

by [Victoria Barnett](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth. By Joe Conason. St. Martin's, 240 pp., \$24.95

Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right. By Al Franken. Dutton, 368 pp., \$24.95.

Al Franken and Joe Conason are mad as hell and they're not going to take it anymore. With the aid of 14 Harvard students, Franken has researched the words and deeds of Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, Condoleeza Rice, George W. Bush et al. and separated the wheat from the chaff (his book is heavy on the chaff, and very funny). Joe Conason takes a more analytical approach, dissecting the way in which conservatives and the commentators who love them have shaped public thinking about patriotism, tax cuts and deficits, family values, affirmative action and the presidential election of 2000. Both authors conclude (well, OK, it's their starting premise) that our political discussion of these and other issues has been manipulated by the hypocrisy, nastiness and downright mendacity of the political right. This is "point-counterpoint" without the interruptions, and with lots of documentation and footnotes.

The only problem with this frontal attack on the claims of the right is that 1) the right still gets to set the agenda and 2) a book devoted to refuting talk radio hosts can quickly get tedious--as, for example, when Franken tries to establish that Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter are more elitist than the liberals they like to accuse of elitism. This is the drawback of Franken's book, as funny as it is; much of it is devoted to his duels with various pundits and politicians.

The book's strength is his ability to zero in on the truth. The most powerful passages are those on economic issues (the irrelevance of most economic debates to those who are truly poor; the incredible wealth accumulated by those who have benefited from their political connections through what Conason calls "crony capitalism") and his conclusions about how lies, sound bites and selfishness have created "a worldview designed to comfort the comfortable and further afflict the afflicted."

Good point.

Conason tries to get beyond liberal-conservative sniping for a more serious discussion of the issues. Like Franken, he gets caught up in deconstructing the smokescreen, and so there's some tit-for-tat. But he's focusing on some serious issues, such as the strangely passive response to the erosion of civil liberties since 9/11. He offers a good (and disturbing) portrayal of how the national conversation about affirmative action has been manipulated by the hypocrisy and grandstanding of its opponents, including a fair dose of racism. And some of his points are certainly worth further discussion: such as why, when polls consistently show majority support for a number of "liberal" issues like universal health coverage, this issue is not a viable campaign topic, let alone the focus of policymaking. Both books often skewer the manipulation of religious language for political ends.

Neither author really explains just why political discourse in the world's most powerful nation has degenerated to the level of a quarrel between four-year-olds in a sandbox. In fact, these books are not so much about our political leaders as about the Greek chorus of pundits who interpret the signs of the times and create the hype that gets treated as political reality. Conason and Franken have decided to fight back, but what this country really needs is a few good journalists who not only know how to ask leaders tough questions, but will keep bugging them until they get real answers. Or perhaps the problem is that we don't have many politicians who actually answer questions. And because politicians, elected or running, are constantly looking over their shoulders to make sure they don't give offense to the common wisdom generated by the pundits, you get the kind of mealy-mouthed kowtowing that passes for political discourse.

Will Rogers once said, "If you ever injected truth into politics you would have no politics," which illustrates that cynicism about our leaders goes way back. I confess that I've joined the pox-on-both-your-houses school of thought on all this. The tragedy is that while we can joke about the hype, the reality is serious. In the midst of the self-posturing that dominates the halls of government, op-ed pages and cable television, U.S. soldiers continue to die, countless civilians have been killed, terrorism remains a threat and, having profoundly destabilized one of the most volatile sections of the globe, we may have unleashed a process that will haunt us for decades. And that's just with regard to Iraq; numerous other crucial issues (AIDS, hunger, the growing number of countries that are self-destructing politically and economically) are falling by the wayside. In the end, Conason and Franken left me

with the desire to dump the pundits and their allies into the Potomac and replace this war of words--lies and rebuttals alike--with some thoughtful and sober discussion about who we are as a nation and what exactly we think we are doing.