

Greg Palast: Armed and dangerous

By Shay Totten
Vermont Guardian

MONTPELIER — You know the U.S. media must be in trouble when an investigative journalist has to turn to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to have his reports aired.

And, if you think that gives Greg Palast more leeway in how he reports on politicians, and corporations, based in the United States, think again.

The brusque, self-promoting Palast will be the first to remind anyone that he is nothing more than a “just the facts, ma’am” private investigator turned journalist (complete with a hat a la Sam Spade). And, there is no First Amendment equivalent in Great Britain. What’s more is that the government fines reporters who make false accusations and jails those who reveal state secrets.

“That means I have to have all my facts down straight, or I can be sued to the fare-thee-well,” said Palast in an interview with the *Vermont Guardian*. “To say you were just acting in the public interest doesn’t cut it. One and you’re dead.”

Palast has yet to receive a cease and desist order from the Bush administration, or any of the other characters he investigates in his latest book *Armed Madhouse: from Baghdad to New Orleans — Sordid Secrets & Strange Tales of a White House Gone Wild*.

The book is a sweeping account of the Bush administration, from 9/11 to what Palast believes is the iron-clad approach in place to secure the 2008 election for the GOP, and contains many of the reports that Palast has aired on the BBC, or has penned for *Harper’s* in the United States or the *Guardian* in Britain.

Palast will be in Montpelier Friday with Ben & Jerry’s co-founder Ben Cohen as part of a national book tour.

Palast recently penned an op-ed for his hometown paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, opining about why investigative journalism is dead in the United States. The reasons, he believes, are simple: Lack of resources, lack of interest, and fear of losing access to the corridors of power.

Palast is no stranger to Vermont, or its political leanings, keeping on top of both its ski conditions and efforts to impeach Pres. George W. Bush. In fact, Palast was able to sneak away with his



family for some late spring skiing last week.

But skiing is not the slippery slope Palast will speak about at the Unitarian Church on Friday. Instead, Palast said the new paperback edition of his book has an extensive new report on how the Help America Vote Act is empowering GOP officials in many states to purge voter rolls and disenfranchise potentially millions of voters.

In 2004, 5.2 million votes were not counted. About 600,000 were voters who were wrongly purged from voter lists or were rejected because they did not have the proper identification when they went to vote. Another 1.6 million voter registrations were rejected, and the remaining number is related to ballots cast, but not counted.

Palast said he estimates that number will rise to 6 million in 2008.

Palast said Attorney General Alberto Gonzales is just another in a series of “glove puppets” intended to distract the media from the real story.

“They always have enough glove puppets to throw out for public execution: Libby, Rumsfeld, and Gonzales. They let the press and the public beat up the puppets and [Bush and Karl Rove] are clean,” said Palast, noting that Bush is much more clever than people credit him.

Palast said the Democratic probe into the alleged political firing of U.S. Attorneys masks what he considers to be a bigger crime — hiring a former Rove aide as the U.S. Attorney in Arkansas. That aide, Tim Griffin, Palast found was at the heart of the GOP effort to challenge voter registrations and purge African American voter lists in 2004.

“That’s the crime,” said Palast.

While similar programs were in place in 2006, Palast admits, “There was an overwhelming reaction against Bush and they got

crushed, but that doesn’t mean all the votes were counted. The Republicans simply imploded and it ain’t going to be such a cakewalk in 2008.”

Palast relishes the fact that his name comes up in e-mails attributed to Rove and Griffin, in which they gloat about the fact that Palast’s work is not widely seen or read in the United States, even though ABC News has an agreement to air his work.

“They’ve said my work will never air on their network,” said Palast.

Palast, who used to be a “forensic economist,” still uses his “follow the money” instincts with each story he pursues.

Take, for example, his recent quest to find the evacuation plans for New Orleans. He couldn’t find them. It turns out the company hired by the Bush administration in 2004 to devise an evacuation plan, at a cost of more than \$1 million, never took into account moving more than 100,000 people out of the city who didn’t own a car. That company, Innovative Emergency Management (IEM) had given plenty of money to GOP candidates in recent years, Palast notes.

As he dug deeper, he found out that the company had little, if any, background in evacuation plans. And, the Bush administration has hired a company to evaluate what went wrong with the plan. The company? IEM.

The worst part, Palast notes, is that officials at Louisiana State University knew the original plans were inadequate, and they began — for free — to work up new ones, and were told to back off.

While investigating this story, Palast took a side trip to a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) site where thousands of people from New Orleans were encamped in “mobile home gulags,” as he puts it in the book. While filming, he was told that since FEMA is part of the Department of Homeland Security that the camps are off-limits to cameras.

Then, he was charged with violating U.S. anti-terror laws for taping the area, and the Exxon refinery nearby.

While this was no joke, Palast does find a punch line to deliver: It took officials two weeks to find him and his crew.

“And we’re on television,” Palast notes. ☺

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