



# GRAND THEFT: RADIO

## WHY ARE CORPORATE VULTURES\* POUNCING ON PACIFICA?

**H**alf a century ago, journalist Lew Hill had a bright idea: listener-supported, community radio that would provide a forum for free expression and dissenting views. He sought to carve out a niche in radio for creative programming, unfettered by commercialism and corporate control. His vision eventually blossomed into the five-station Pacifica network.

Today, there are very few independent, locally-oriented stations left — and Hill's legacy is under siege. Extraordinary programs like Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now!" have been placed at risk by corporate predators whose motto seems to be "Democracy No!" They've hijacked the Pacifica Board and they want to rewrite the bylaws — and perhaps sell one or more stations while lining their own pockets.

\*Nothing here is meant to disparage vultures in any way. Real vultures are much nicer than this one.

# WHO'S IN CHARGE A



For decades, those who ran Pacifica Radio were defenders of society's underdogs and critics of corporate greed. Pacifica was the place where you could hear stories seldom heard elsewhere about war

and peace, social justice, civil rights, prison reform, labor, corporate crime and the environment.

But now Pacifica has new people in charge — drawn from the ranks of power brokers, wheeler-dealers and union-busters. When they have any radio background at all, it mostly consists of making deals for the sale and transfer of station licenses. WBAI in New York could be worth \$150 million.

Take attorney **John Murdock** of Epstein, Becker & Green, a nationwide law firm that boasts about its expertise in helping employers maintain "a union-free workplace." He joined the Pacifica National Board last year. The firm now represents Pacifica in lawsuits in which he, as a Board member, is a named defendant. What does that mean? The longer he holds out, the more money EB&G makes.



John Murdock

In January, Murdock released a draft of his proposed "comprehensive" changes to the Pacifica Foundation bylaws. Among other drastic changes, he wants to empower three people from a five-member executive committee to sell any Pacifica station without the approval of a majority of the full Board (17 members).

If a sale occurs, Murdock would allow a self-selected, unaccountable group of directors like himself to cash in — while shunting aside Local Advisory Boards comprised of community leaders and listener-supporters.



Micheal Palmer

Board member and treasurer **Micheal Palmer**, who revealed his mindset in a leaked 1999 e-mail urging the sale of New York's WBAI and Berkeley's KPFA, works in Houston as a vice president of CB Richard Ellis, the nation's largest commercial real estate services company. On its website, the firm claims to possess "unequalled knowledge of Mexico," encourages clients to "look south of the U.S. border" to exploit cheap labor, and urges them to "co-locate near worker housing areas that will enjoy lower turnover and less competition for their workforce than other *maquiladoras*."

**David Acosta**, Board chair, is a certified public accountant in Houston. It has been reported that he, too, would support the sale of a Pacifica station. Since there have been tax liens and civil judgments against him (from the IRS, the State of Texas and the University of Texas-Austin), it's fair to ask whether Acosta's financial savvy is the kind Pacifica needs.



David Acosta

According to The Washington Post, Board member **Bertram Lee, Sr.**, has had a "career as a financier... marked by dramatic swings between wealth and failure." He has been described as "specializing in media buyouts" involving such properties as WKYS-FM in Washington and a CBS-TV affiliate in Boston.

Formerly a sports team owner and a director at Reebok, which has been widely criticized for profiting from sweatshop conditions overseas, Lee filed for bankruptcy in August 1998 and again in October 1999, using a Chapter 7 filing (total liquidation of assets) both times.

Pacifica stations are funded almost entirely from listener donations and have never accepted corporate underwriting. But Lee likes the idea: "Corporate donations don't bring with them any control of any kind," he said last year.

Pacifica Board vice-chair **Ken Ford** works

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Verna Avery-Brown

for the National Assn. of Homebuilders, a developers' lobbying group in Washington that supports "deregulation over the rights of the disabled and the environment," according to one news report. The association contributes huge sums to political candidates, mostly Republicans.

Why has Pacifica lost respected broadcasters like **Verna Avery-Brown**, its nightly news voice for 11 years and the only African-American news anchor in public broadcasting? "I left when I realized the majority of the Board members were too timid, too uninformed or too conservative to give a damn," she says. "I left because I no longer felt the renegade spirit of Lew Hill was in control of Pacifica. I left because the Pacifica I had fallen in love with no longer existed."



Verna Avery-Brown

**ONCE IT WAS FREE-SPEECH RADIO; NOW, CONFORM OR BE BANISHED**

*Don't talk about firings, bannings or hostile takeover attempts. Freedom of speech at work is history. What do you think this is, free-speech radio?*

That, in essence is Pacifica's stance at WBAI in New York and elsewhere. At all five stations, management is trying to muzzle or muffle programmers' and listeners' voices.

"Quite simply, the Pacifica Board has been hijacked by a small clique that has more in common with corporate vultures

# AT PACIFICA RADIO?

than with working-class Americans," journalist **Juan Gonzalez** said when he resigned as co-host of "Democracy Now!," which originates at WBAI and airs on 30 other stations. "This clique insults Pacifica's loyal listeners by asking them to finance its shenanigans."

The clique has also launched a campaign of harassment against one of Pacifica's most renowned journalists, **Amy Goodman**. "The motivation is blatantly political," she wrote in a letter to the Board last year. "We are not only being censored for our critical coverage of Democrats and Republicans, but for giving voice to a growing, grassroots movement that fundamentally challenges the status quo: people fighting sweatshops, police brutality, prison growth and corporate globalization."

The "Christmas Coup" at WBAI reveals Pacifica's ruthlessness and utter disregard



Juan Gonzalez

for the democratic process. On the holiday weekend, Executive Director Bessie Wash arrived from Washington to fire Station Manager **Valerie Van Isler**, Program Director **Bernard White** and producer **Sharan Harper** (a union shop steward). Other long-time producers and volunteers were banned from WBAI. Locks were changed and security guards brought in. The Local Advisory Board was barred from holding public meetings at the station.

These events at WBAI recall the 1999 attack on KPFA, when General Manager **Nicole Sawaya** and award-winning programmer **Larry Bensky** were summarily fired. Then Pacifica hired armed security guards and locked out the entire staff and the community for 23 days. Management only backed down because tens of thousands of protesters hit the streets of the East Bay.

Many Pacifica unions, including United

**"Quite simply, the Pacifica Board has been hijacked by a small clique that has more in common with corporate vultures than with working-class Americans."**

Juan Gonzalez

Electrical Local 404 at WBAI, have slammed Pacifica's actions as flagrant union-busting. Not surprisingly, Pacifica's lawyers at Epstein, Becker & Green have sought to suppress criticism. They have even sent intimidating letters demanding that listeners' websites be closed down "immediately."

Suppression of free speech is not uncommon in commercial radio, but how can anyone justify it at Pacifica — and threaten to sue the listeners, to boot?

## MEDIA GIANTS CONSUME RADIO

In its mission statement, Pacifica pledges to "promote cultural diversity and pluralistic community expression... to contribute to a lasting understanding between individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors...to promote freedom of the press... (and) maintain an independent funding base."

**Dan Coughlin**, ousted as director of Pacifica Network News in 1999 after airing a 30-second report about a one-day boycott of the network by Pacifica affiliates, says: "The present organization of society creates war and poverty and racism and, like Lew Hill, we want to abolish those conditions." But some on the current Pacifica Board don't want to hear it.

More than 50% of all radio stations

have changed hands since 1996, when Congress last relaxed ownership rules. In the five markets where Pacifica is heard, Clear Channel and Viacom/CBS/Infinity own a total of 70 AM and FM stations. Together, these two giants control about half the air space in the top 50 markets.

With stations all over the country becoming more standardized and "formatted" every day, those that offer non-conformist news and opinion are an endangered species. Already, Pacifica's WPFW in Washington and KPFT in Houston have gone virtually all-music, with only a few minutes a day of news and public affairs.

**Will you help rescue free-speech radio from the corporate vultures?**



# TELL THE CORPORATE VULTURES: GET OFF THE PACIFICA BOARD NOW!

## HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Clip, sign and mail the letter below to Pacifica National Board Chair David Acosta, or write your own. Mr. Acosta can also be reached at (713) 926-4604, or by e-mail: cpadga@aol.com.
2. Fill out the coupon below and return it to the Pacifica Campaign.

David Acosta, Chair  
Pacifica Foundation  
c/o 102 South Lockwood  
Houston, Texas 77011-3124

Dear Mr. Acosta:

I demand that you, Ken Ford, Bertram Lee, Sr., John Murdock and Micheal Palmer resign immediately from the Pacifica National Board.

As a supporter of non-commercial, free-speech radio, I am outraged by the firings and bannings of staff and listeners, the censorship of on-air discussion, the thuggish tactics and the creation of a climate of fear at Pacifica stations. I strongly oppose the attempt to rewrite Pacifica's bylaws so that local input on key decisions is minimized and programming decisions are dictated from above.

You must accept responsibility for the chaos and mismanagement you have created. Resign now! You don't own Pacifica and it is not your plaything.

I will withhold all pledges to Pacifica or to fund drives at its five stations until further notice. I want democratic decision-making throughout Pacifica and I will resist all attempts to sell the stations.

There's no excuse for abandoning the principles of Lew Hill and the historic mission of the stations in Berkeley, Houston, Los Angeles, New York and Washington. Please let me know how you plan to address these important matters.

Sincerely,

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_\_

ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

### YES, I SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN TO STOP THE CORPORATE TAKEOVER OF PACIFICA

- I have sent a form letter (left) to David Acosta.
- I/my organization have sent a personal letter to Mr. Acosta (please enclose a copy).
- Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ copies of this brochure.
- Enclosed is a tax-deductible contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to support national protest activities. Make checks payable to **Institute for Media Analysis/Pacifica Campaign** and send to:

**PACIFICA CAMPAIGN  
51 MACDOUGAL ST., #80  
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10012**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

To stay informed about campaign activities, go to [www.pacificacampaign.org](http://www.pacificacampaign.org).

To find out how you can support and contribute to ongoing lawsuits against the Pacifica Board and to other groups seeking to reform the network, go to [www.savepacificanet.net](http://www.savepacificanet.net) and [www.radio4all.org](http://www.radio4all.org).

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