

Forget What They Told You

The Truth According To Greg Palast

ARNIE COOPER

Greg Palast, the fifty-three-year-old investigative journalist with the trademark fedora and trench coat, is a master at unraveling the tangled threads of political stories and sifting through the “bullshit,” as he puts it. A true independent, he harbors no great love for either the Democratic or the Republican Party and calls journalism schools “brain-death factories.”

Palast has made few friends with his no-holds-barred investigations. His exposé of corruption in British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s cabinet drew fire from the British tabloid the *Mirror*, which ran a huge cover photo of Palast accompanied by the headline “The Liar.” His reporting stood up to scrutiny, however, and Palast won the British equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for the story.

Palast grew up poor in California’s wealthy San Fernando Valley — a situation that left him “a scarred human being,” he says half-jokingly. He earned scholarships to California State University at Northridge and UCLA, and he did his postgraduate work with conservative economist Milton Friedman. Palast became a forensic economist — someone who analyzes damages and liability in legal cases — and went on to do undercover investigations with the United Steelworkers of America, the Enron workers’ coalition in Latin America, and assorted environmental and consumer groups.

Palast went into journalism out of a desire to tell a wider audience what he’d discovered in his investigations about the wrongdoings of powerful elites — or, as he puts it, “I couldn’t kill the rich, so I had to write about them.” When the U.S. press showed little interest in his reports, Palast moved to Great Britain, where he went to work for the *Guardian* newspaper. After he revealed that Enron, the failed Texas energy corporation, had illegally given money to the British government, Palast was hired by the BBC.

On the BBC’s *Newsnight*, Palast has covered many stories the American mainstream media won’t touch, such as how the 2004 presidential election could have gone to John Kerry if not for alleged vote tampering in Florida and New Mexico. He has won six Project Censored awards and received the American Civil Liberties Union’s Upton Sinclair Freedom of Expression Award in 2004. Now back in the U.S., Palast is a contributing editor at Harper’s magazine and can be seen in the documentaries *Bush Family Fortunes* and *New Orleans: Big Easy to Big Empty*. He lives in New York City with his wife and twin nine-year-old girls.

While waiting for Palast to arrive in his office for this interview, I noticed a mysterious metal case. Inside was a voting machine from Broward County, Florida, purchased on eBay by one of his assistants as a souvenir of Palast’s groundbreaking story on election fraud in Florida during the 2000 presidential race. The rest of the office — a converted apartment in lower Manhattan — was cluttered with empty cardboard boxes, bags of styrofoam packing peanuts, and several hundred copies of Palast’s latest book, *Armed Madhouse* (Dutton), a sardonic examination of corporate and government fraud. (A new edition, subtitled *From Baghdad to New Orleans — Sordid Secrets & Strange Tales of a White House Gone Wild*, was released last month.) On one wall was a framed copy of the *New York Daily News* from December 6, 1988. “LILCO Lied, Jury Finds,” read the headline. Palast’s economic investigation — he wasn’t yet a reporter at the time — had helped the government win its case against the Long Island Lighting Company, which was found to have lied about the final cost of its Shoreham Nuclear Power Station in order to justify a rate hike. Palast writes about the case in his book *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* (Plume).

At last Palast arrived, dressed in holey overalls and a sweat shirt that had obviously gotten much use. The trademark trench coat was nowhere in sight. As we headed to the Atlas Cafe, Palast spoke on his cellphone, scheduling an appearance on *Air America* radio. He stopped by a store to pick up some antacid, then offered me a tablet as if it were chewing gum.

It was a warm fall day, and we sat outside. Though the sound of traffic was deafening, it was no match for Palast’s voice. We talked for more than an hour. Then his cellphone rang, and he abruptly stood up and shook my hand. Before I knew it, the interview was over, and Palast was running down the street.

Cooper: How did you go from being a “forensic economist” to appearing on the BBC’s *Newsnight*?

Palast: I couldn’t stand it. I was doing all these investigations and reading the “paper of record,” and they’d either miss the story or get it dead wrong. And that’s the *New York Times* — a good paper. For example, I was working on the Exxon Valdez case for the natives of Alaska, who wanted the truth about what caused the oil spill. I ended up finding, among other things, that it wasn’t a drunk skipper who steered wrong and hit a reef. That’s not how ships move.

Cooper: What did happen?

Palast: The ship’s radar was shut off because it was too

expensive to maintain. That was one cause. The other was that the ship didn't have enough safety equipment to contain the spill. I mean, tankers hit reefs all the time, but the accidents don't all destroy a thousand miles of coastline. They're supposed to have safety equipment. But the media focused on the ship's captain, so the real story didn't come out.

Then I did an investigation of racketeering at the Shoreham Nuclear Power Station on Long Island. If you were reading the *Times* and *Newsday* and the rest, you'd have thought the government was abusing the racketeering laws to take down this poor power company for political purposes. But we're not talking about some innocent mom and pop operation. We're

serious criminal economic investigation: I set up a front. I got inside his cabinet. I recorded conversations secretly. And this investigation was costly. The big hotel suites and everything else cost like ten thousand pounds. My editors had never seen anything like it. The story almost brought down the prime minister, and I got the equivalent of Britain's Pulitzer Prize for it. That's because I didn't know shit about journalism. If I had, I would've just made a few phone calls and written, "This guy said this," and, "That guy alleged that," and, "Who can say?"

Cooper: What did you find out about Prime Minister Tony Blair that was so damaging?

Palast: His cabinet was selling legislation to the high-



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talking about corporate executives who deliberately lied under oath, perjuring themselves again and again, prepared to incinerate half of New York so they could steal \$4 billion. And after they were convicted, the jury's verdict was thrown out.

Cooper: So you wanted to tell the public what you knew, but you had no journalism degree.

Palast: No, and it was very helpful not to have one. I didn't learn any sloppy reporting habits or how to rewrite press releases. In fact, I was very naive. The first big story I was assigned by the *London Observer* [the *Guardian's* Sunday sister paper] was to investigate Tony Blair. So I did it as I would have done a

est corporate bidders, especially American corporations and power companies such as Enron. The politicians weren't profiting personally so much — though Blair's right-hand man indirectly got a questionable loan. The American companies were trying to buy access in the crudest way they could, which was to offer support and funds for Blair's party. And Blair was eager to prove that he was a corporate toady and not a rabid, left-wing socialist. He did a good job.

Cooper: Would you say that your decision to become a writer was driven mostly by your passion to expose fraud?

Palast: I came to journalism out of anger and resentment.

I don't have a great, overriding philosophy, like Marxism or something, but I do have this overriding resentment against the privileged. All of them.

Cooper: Does that stem from your childhood?

Palast: Yeah. I was an underprivileged child, and I've never gotten over it. [Laughter.] I just hate pricks like the first George Bush, who could make a phone call and get his son out of fighting in Vietnam. (I was ready to go, but my lottery number was 347, so I lucked out.) In fact, I covered the story, before Dan Rather did, of how George W. Bush got a free ride out of military service through his daddy. That story wasn't about George W.; it was about privilege. And it was about following the money, the paybacks, which have never been reported here: millions of dollars to keep it quiet. It was mostly a scam to get the sons of Democratic officials out of Vietnam: Texas Congressman Lloyd Bentsen's son and Texas Governor John Connally's son. They added George W.'s name in part so that they'd have a Republican involved, to give them a measure of political safety.

Cooper: If it was such a clear-cut case, why did Dan Rather cave in so easily?

Palast: He believed in the system. He was a part of it, or the system was a part of him. By the way, I interviewed him on *Newsnight*. Now that he's a pariah, he figures he can hang out in the leper colony with me. [Laughter.]

The thing is, you can have one or the other: freedom or prestige. We'd all like to say whatever we want *and* get all the prizes and awards and money from the powers that be, but that ain't going to happen.

Cooper: In your book *Armed Madhouse* you write, "Dick Cheney's the only guy in America who'd rather have a hurricane than a blow job." What do you mean?

Palast: I mean look at the value of Hurricane Katrina to the Republicans. They had lost Louisiana. The state had a Democratic governor, a Democratic senator, and it was definitely going Democratic in the next presidential election — all because of the black vote in New Orleans. Then the problem washed away. A year later, seventy-three thousand people are still living in trailers, and 80 percent of the evacuated population has not returned. That's almost the entire Democratic voting population of New Orleans.

Cooper: You've been passionate about uncovering voter fraud, beginning with the 2000 presidential election. But there was fraud long before that. Can you put it into a historical context?

Palast: The idea that America's a democracy is a fucking lie. We've had one fixed election after another. By my calculations, Hubert Humphrey beat Richard Nixon in 1968. Of course, Humphrey was a jackal as well. But what is not widely understood is that we've always had a system in America of not counting certain votes. My good friends on the Left are



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afraid that the Republicans are going to steal the next election by computer — that the software is going to allow Karl Rove to change the vote. Well, most people who worry about that are white. Black people know they've stolen the vote the old-fashioned way for centuries. First they said blacks couldn't vote. Now they just don't register them to vote, and if you're black and you do manage to register and find your polling place, they don't count your vote. Yesterday I spent twelve hours using my forensic-economics background in statistics to figure out that 1.6 million black voters have been denied registration and flushed off the voting rolls illegally. The percentage of black people attempting to register is about 77 percent — the same as the percentage of white people. But whereas 75 percent of whites end

up on the registries, only about 60 percent of blacks do. What happens to those missing registration forms?

My friend the Reverend Jesse Jackson is busy doing voter-registration drives, but it's like filling up a leaky bucket. They don't have to change your vote by hacking the software if they keep you off the registry. Around 5 million people attempted to register over the past two years, and more than four hundred thousand were rejected for all kinds of bogus reasons.

Cooper: What sort of reasons?

Palast: What I uncovered in Florida was the game of purging people from the voter rolls by calling them felons when they aren't. That was easy to do. And the Democratic Party isn't going to come to the rescue of black people who are accused of being felons, because they don't want to answer the question, "Do you want these criminals to vote?" It doesn't matter if they're not criminals. There are only seven states now that don't let people with felony convictions vote, but that's 2 million people, about 46 percent of them black.

In Ohio the big issue was the Diebold computerized voting machines. Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell was thrilled when all those white folks marched into his office and said, "Don't you dare use those Diebold machines!" He was happy to keep the punch-card machines in the ghettos, because he could still ensure we wouldn't see those votes. Ohio had about eighty thousand punch-card ballots on which the vote for president was blank. Do you think eighty thousand people waited in line for six hours so they could *not* vote for president?

Cooper: What about the Voting Rights Act of 1965? Did it accomplish nothing?

Palast: No, it accomplished plenty. I can't say that it's all grim. That kind of exaggeration makes people throw up their hands and say, "Forget it." The history of America has been this back and forth between successful popular movements — the women's movement, the environmental movement, the abolitionist movement — and the counterrevolution, which operates using sneaky means. You get the big trumpeting law, and then they quietly fuck you. The problem is, they're getting better at fucking you. *(end of excerpt)*