

# The Sound of Fire

by G. Murphy Donovan (January 2015)



“I don’t describe the future. I try to prevent it.” – RB

Ray [Bradbury](#) (1920-2012) is best known for science fiction or fantasy. His strong suit was actually irony, the kind of satire that isn’t as funny as it is menacing. *Fahrenheit 451*, arguably his most popular novel, was about literature, censorship, and oppressive politics – a government that burns books.

Dystopian fiction is not prophesy. It’s more like an omen, a signal that small changes today may have large consequences tomorrow. Informed speculation does not require verisimilitude or a prophet’s vision. Memory, imagination, and rhetorical craft are enough. Those who imagine the future, often shape tomorrow.

Before his death, Bradbury claimed that book burning is moot in a [culture](#) where few read. Indeed, the cyber future could have been one of his cautionary tales, a smug medium where reading is mostly confined to tweets, text messages, or emails. [TV](#) or internet addicts are largely anonymous and bloodless, a group exposed to digital triple jeopardy. Providers, government, and the *lumpen proletariat* now have the power to censor, manipulate, and control.

One misplaced word or phrase on television or the internet might launch the furies: official creeps, dot.com dictators, Press mandarins, or internet trolls. Unlike Bradbury’s municipal fire brigade, censorship has been democratized. The internet weaponizes any real or imagined offense or grievance. The worst among us can and will use the internet to torch free speech – and the speaker.

To expand one of Bradbury’s more notable metaphors, the sound of “thunder” that you hear next may be a cyber-bully firing the fiber optic bullet that [ruins](#) your day, your reputation, your career, or your life.

Alas, the apostles of unrestrained technology, like their libertine ideological counterparts, often cook their young. More irony! Bullying, pornography (figurative and literal), banality, and blowback make for a toxic brew. Liberals, who you might expect to be the guardians of free speech, now play with the matches of censorship too. More irony!

Progressives are a lot of things, but hero is not usually the first thought that comes to

mind. Nonetheless, those of us who scribble about the vicissitudes of 21<sup>st</sup> Century politics and culture occasionally discover that some on the Left sometimes get it right. This is not to say that progressives cannot evolve. Clearly some do. Prominent examples abound.

In the political arena, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher come to mind. Reagan emerged from the ultra-liberal Hollywood hothouse where tissue paper separates liberal from libertine. The president-to-be was a union man too. Thatcher was also unique; the first and only female British Prime Minister, a feminist model and pragmatic Conservative. As a rule, Jane Fonda politics are closer to the norm at the feminist end of the political spectrum.

Still, the most influential voices are often those of cultural not political notables. Ray Bradbury, for one, stands on the shoulders of George Orwell (1903-1950). The one-way mirror at NSA would not come as a surprise to either. Parallel to Winston Churchill, Orwell evolved from the [Bloomsberry](#) miasma, the smog of progressive English media and the British Broadcasting Company.

The BBC is as close to Hollywood that you can get with other peoples' money. Nonetheless, Orwell, after some curb level exposure to tactical Communism in Spain, had the artistic integrity to mock the Soviet Union, then a strategic ally. Orwell's allegorical exposés of unrestrained tyranny and social folly are benchmarks of barnyard satire and modern art. The best fiction, or comedy, is truth.

The dangers of communitarian excess were obvious to Orwell long before history saw National Socialism and Communism as different shades of the same coercive fascist ideology. Unfortunately, Orwell came along long after Big Brother had a toehold in the West. Even the fall of the Berlin Wall was anti-climactic. Socialism had already jumped the Wall, leapfrogging Churchill's [Iron Curtain](#) metaphor.

The Cold War coughed up some cultural heroes in America too. Elia Kazan, a Greek immigrant, comes to mind. In art and national politics, Kazan took on the sacred cows of socialism and the Hollywood establishment. He used cinema to expose corrupt unions (*On the Waterfront*), political racketeering, and anti-Semitism. In the real world Kazan, like Orwell, knew that the Media arts, in the hands of doctrinaire activists, became propaganda. [Norman Lear's](#) preachy oeuvre is testimony to the liberal bunkum and balderdash still a staple in contemporary television.

Censorship and propaganda are two sides of the same currency. The science of surveys (Nielsen ratings) is the most telling. Surveys and polling are in the end retail tools, attempts to

monitor then cater to preferences. Such surveys influence media content, advertising (a polite euphemism for retail propaganda), and ultimately, behavior. You could do worse than think of Nielsen, the Internet, and the NSA/GCHQ peep shows as milestones of electronic evolution.

In many ways, behavior surveys beyond Nielsen, Madison Avenue, and Hollywood (Alfred [Kinsey's](#) research is a prominent example) are a lot like environmental "science;" data collected and [sifted to suit](#) a private agenda or a foregone conclusion. Science without [morality](#) is a death wish.

The politics of scientific salesmanship are not much different than the politics of politics. Control is the end game. Lines between fact, advocacy, and entertainment are blurred or erased. Objective or ambiguous data is lost to manipulation. The Nielsen Company and its network clients have created a cultural echo chamber, a generation of halfwits who prefer to be told, or entertained, rather than be informed. "[Wasteland](#)" might just be another metaphor for gullible.

The North Korean hack attack on Sony Pictures is the most recent Orwellian flail in Media politics. *The Interview*, a comic film about a plot to assassinate North Korea's *Kim Jung-Un* may have had some inside-the-Beltway [sponsors](#). Pyongyang, however, struck Hollywood first and now the film has been suppressed. Another regime change project has exploded on the launch pad. Propaganda and blow back are bunk mates.

Even Public Television has succumbed to the manipulation meme. The American CPB now feeds in three troughs: taxpayer dollars, charity handouts, and Madison Avenue largesse. Non-profit, non-commercial TV sold out to the mall and no one noticed! Institutional objectivity was always a tough sell. Like common sense, Media integrity is yet another loss to the political or commercial marketplace.

With most impartiality abandoned by public and private institutional outlets, Media candor has devolved to individuals, iconoclasts, or comics. Sharyl Attkinsson is a case study among American journalists. Alas, Ms. Attkinsson discovered that political [truth at CBS](#) in the Obama era is also a variety of professional suicide.

But Ms. Attkinsson is not the only standout in an industry dominated by liberal themes and associated agendas. Some of the most enterprising examples of individual courage are still to be found in contemporary satire. Profiles in entertainer courage here would include William Maher Jr., Dennis Miller, and Timothy Allen Dick.

Bill Maher

Bill Maher is an annoying progressive who in the space of a few months has crossed swords with Islam, Hollywood, the University of California, and Ben Affleck. Maher spooked the trolls by comparing Muslims to the Mafia. Left Coast students launched an internet campaign to have Maher [bounced](#) as commencement speaker at UC Berkley December graduation.

Maher has a dog in the Islamism fight; he's half Jewish, half Irish. With that genetic mix, Maher would almost have to be tough, funny, and hyperbolic.

Ben Affleck, in contrast, is a Ted Kennedy Democrat, a rehab success story. Writer, actor, now director; Affleck has worked his way to the top of the Hollywood pile. Alas, Boston Ben, is also a victim of an all too common Hollywood conceit, confusing celebrity with omniscience. Affleck is yet another would be censor who claims to know what Muslims think – while ignoring what Islamists say or do. “Experts” like Affleck also presume to know the true hearts of the mythical “moderate” Muslim majority.



Affleck's world is like the Mohammed/Danish cartoon drama, an object lesson about culture that has little tolerance for truth, reflection – or humor. This colloquy on the Left is beyond ironic, liberal Hollywood icons defending a cult religion where free speech or belief can be a [capital](#) offense.

If you witnessed the Affleck/Maher [debate](#), you saw a metaphorical mercy killing, a petulant actor from Boston out of his depth, humiliated by an acerbic comic from New York who knows the real world, a place where people are literally losing their heads to false prophets. Affleck confirmed his ignorance and naïveté by trying to defend Muslims with the race card.

“Since when is Islam a race,” quipped Maher.

Ouch, Ben!

Dennis Miller

Dennis Miller is a *Saturday Night Live* alumnus who seems to have had a “road to Damascus” moment on the streets of New York. Miller's bright flash of insight came when passenger airliners were flown into the Trade Center twin towers on September 11, 2001 by Saudi Sunni Muslim “criminals.” Although Miller claims to be a libertarian, like Maher, he has no illusions about the Hollywood Left or “moderate” Muslims. Miller's comedic gifts are unique, a distinct departure from the usual politically correct SNL banalities at NBC.

Dana Carvey and Jon Lovitz should get an honorable [mention](#) here as two other SNL vets brave enough to criticize Obama skills and defend Dennis Miller. Even Lady Gaga should get a hat tip for performing in Israel, defying the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction (BDS) thugs.

If you can follow Miller's Byzantine digressions, his rhetoric is to comedy what buttermilk is to baking, superfluous in a good way. When Miller has a pompous progressive in the crosshairs, he rarely misses. Of one such he said:

"Michael Moore simultaneously represents everything I detest in a human being and everything I feel obligated to defend in an American. Quite simply, it is every moron's right to be utterly, completely wrong."

Tim Allen

If you aspire to be a comic and your name is Timothy Allen Dick, your first act would be a name change lest you become the joke. Such exigencies gave a rebranded Tim Allen to the world of television. The rest is history.

In *Last Man Standing*, Allen plays an outdoor dad trying to survive a stoic wife and a family of daughters midst all the social absurdities of life in the Obama nanny state. With a boy, only one penis is a worry. With daughters, every penis is a menace.

Obama regime domestic and foreign policy follies are God's gift to Allen's writers. As he did in *Home Improvement*, Allen uses one-man advertising cameos, the show within a show, to skewer the low hanging fruit on the Left.

The recent Clinton/Obama tag team should have been a mother lode for all comics, but only Tim Allen exploits progressive claptrap on a weekly basis. Unlike Norman Lear's straw men, the *Last Man* and its supporting cast are all believable characters.

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Language often fails us when we try to categorize art or artists. Trying to pigeon hole George Orwell is still a cottage industry. Alas, few would deny that Orwell's satire was instrumental in leading the world through, and out of, two fascist nightmares. Today, the free world is again confronted with another totalitarian specter, this time religious fascism. Coercion, not nationalism, is the dogma that defines Islamic imperialism.

Few politicians or entertainers, right or left, have had the courage to mock or call out Islam or its apologists. Yes, not all Muslims are guilty. Would that we could say the same for

Islamism, the ideology. Some few intelligent American comics are baiting the swords and the beards. These satiric heroes merit a standing ovation.

Hegel had Minerva's [owl](#) taking flight at dusk, or as Goldie [West](#) might have put it, "too old too soon, too smart too late." Wisdom about the past is only possible after it's over, a piece of cake compared to preventing Ray Bradbury's future. We ignore the dystopian signals from the likes of Orwell and Bradbury at our peril. History moves on four axes; East or West, North or South. We have the capacity to become our fondest dreams – or our worst nightmares.

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G. Murphy Donovan writes about the politics of national security.

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