

September 5, 2003

Last evening, returning from the coast, I stopped at the store at Somes Bar, near the mouth of the Salmon River. The store was still open at 9 PM; several cars were gathered with people near them and on the bench by the door, talking. I joined them. Most I know, some I've known for over 20 years. They all know who I am.

To a person, these are progressive people. One came to the area years ago as a hippie – part of the back to the land movement of the 1960s. In the past this man, a white water and fishing river guide, was a supporter of the organization I work for – the Klamath Forest Alliance. A few years ago he volunteered boat and time for a fundraising river trip, a benefit for KFA.

Yet in conversation with this man and with the store owner (another supporter of progressive causes) it was apparent to me that their attitude toward me had changed. There was a certain coolness, a tentativeness, as we see when someone is not sure that the other person is trustworthy.

I went into the store to buy a few items and noticed the Pioneer Press displayed prominently near the cash register. For the past five years the Pioneer Press has published lies and half truths designed to undermine the credibility and integrity of KFA, and specifically my integrity and credibility. The publication has magnified and exploited my weaknesses and failings in order to cast an aura of doubt about my intentions and integrity. When most folks read this stuff they are incredulous. Often they know directly that what they are reading is false. At other times they suspect the “facts” and allegations are false because they are so outrageous. Through experience most folks have come to question – or at least to wonder about – the truthfulness of what they read in the Pioneer Press.

Nevertheless, many people, perhaps most people, who read this paper regularly – including some of my friends and supporters - have become like the store owner or my old, back-to-the-land hippie brother, that is, they see me and they feel a certain visceral antipathy. Of course they suppress it, often they are not even aware of it. What is expressed is, for the most part, nonverbal – a reticence, a certain coolness, sometimes only a lack of enthusiasm.

I have come to believe that these people – their attitude toward me and toward KFA – have been conditioned by what they read about us, week after week and year after year, in the Pioneer Press. And that is the great discovery, the great truth, of the propagandist. It does not matter if what you say about a person, an organization or an incident is true or false. It does not matter if the *reader* suspects or even *knows* that what is being read is false, distorted or even defamatory. The great discovery of the propagandist is that if you repeat something often enough and long enough people will come to believe it – or at least to suspect that it is true – even if they judge each individual instance of the propaganda effort to be false or misleading.

This great discovery, which is known as *the big lie*, is very effective and therefore very powerful because it builds on a basic feature of the human species. It is the same human trait that underlies the power of gossip, that generates what we now call *public opinion*. Let us recognize that the human species has a great capacity for group think, for group mind.

I admit that I do not know what to do about this tendency and the effect of it in undermining the causes of truth, justice, understanding and democracy. I have learned through sad experience

that it does not work to respond in an attempt to refute. Even if the newspaper or other propaganda outlet prints or reports your response it is drowned out by the constant drone of misinformation compounded of insinuations, half truths and outright lies. The only effective response I know is to offer facts and honest reporting out there consistently and effectively. And that is why the river communities – if they are to retain or recapture the progressiveness that has characterized them since the 70s – need a new newspaper, a newspaper dedicated to reporting and presenting issues and events with an integrity based on the desire to present the truth.