

## Jerome Corsi's "NonFiction Bestseller" Is Neither

The publication on August 1 of Jerome Corsi's book, *The Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality*, has triggered considerable controversy in political and publishing circles, not only because the book is filled with many lies and distortions, but also because Corsi has long been affiliated with the nut-case wing of the conservative movement. Last Friday, John McCain exacerbated the storm when he responded to a reporter's question about the book by saying, "Gotta keep your sense of humor," which some observers took to be a casual endorsement of the book.

Several anti-Obama books have recently arrived in bookstores, but *Obama Nation* is getting the most attention, in large part because it is so inflammatory and is being heavily marketed. The book's publisher has 475,000 copies in print, according to a company spokesperson. In contrast, the first serious liberal book about the Democratic candidate -- Robert Kuttner's *Obama's Challenge* -- is being released August 25 with a first printing of 75,000.

Despite *Obama Nation*'s many lies and distortions, the book wasn't put out by an ideologically-driven right-wing publisher such as Regnery, but by the profit-driven Simon & Schuster, one of the country's largest and most respected publishers, now owned by CBS Corporation. Corsi has been interviewed on numerous TV and radio talk shows (both right-wingers like Sean Hannity and mainstreamers like Larry King). He and his book have been profiled in the *New York Times* (on the front page) and by other mainstream publications, lending credibility to *Obama Nation*'s scurrilous claims. The book has risen to the top of the *Times* best-seller list, despite indications that its sales were artificially inflated by bulk sales, most likely by right-wing anti-Obama groups. Many bookstores, especially major national chains, are heavily promoting the book and stocking their "best seller" shelves with this mudslinging hatchet job. The *New York Times* even published the book's Preface [on its website](#).

Corsi catapulted to notoriety in 2004 as the author of *Unfit for Command*, which attacked Sen. John Kerry's military record in Vietnam in the midst of his presidential bid. Corsi's accusations, along with those of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, the group that ran misleading TV ads against Kerry, were later contradicted by news reports, but they nevertheless had a political impact by generating considerable media attention that distorted Kerry's genuine record as a courageous war hero. Indeed, they may have cost Kerry the election.

Corsi has long-term ties to extreme right-wing, white supremacist hate groups. He writes for the ultra-right [World Net Daily](#). He's called Arabs "ragheads," Bill Clinton an "anti-American communist," Islam a "a worthless, dangerous Satanic religion," Martin Luther King a "shake-down artist," and Katie Couric "Little Katie Communist." He recently was scheduled to appear on the Memphis-based white-supremacist radio show,

"[Political Cesspool](#)," whose host, James Edwards, referred to Slate columnist Timothy Noah as "Jew Timothy Noah." (Corsi canceled his appearance after facing a firestorm of bad publicity).

Corsi [told the New York Times](#) that he wrote the book in order "to defeat Obama. I don't want Obama to be in office," but he has also been critical of John McCain and, in fact, supports the Constitution Party's presidential candidate, Chuck Baldwin.

The Kerry campaign was justifiably criticized for not responding quickly or forcefully enough to Corsi's *Unfit for Command*. The Obama campaign has learned from Kerry's mistake. The campaign quickly released on its website a [point-by-point rebuttal](#) of Corsi's book, part of the broader "Fight the Smears" initiative to respond immediately to attacks. Obama campaign spokesman Tommy Ventor said that the book is "made up of the same old debunked smears that have been floating around the Internet for months." He also called Corsi a "discredited liar who is peddling another piece of garbage to continue the Bush-Cheney politics he helped perpetuate four years ago."

Independent of the Obama campaign, other critics have identified numerous lies and errors in *Obama Nation*, including a thorough and [devastating critique](#) by Media Matters and [another by John K. Wilson](#) on the Huffington Post. Newscasters on MSNBC have started describing it as "the dishonest book" about Obama.

Some of Corsi's lies are simply stupid, such as his claim that Obama didn't dedicate his first book, *Dreams of My Father*, to his family, when in fact the book's introduction includes a dedication to "my mother, my grandparents, my siblings." Others are more hateful and vituperative, such as his claim that Obama "has yet to answer questions" about whether "he stopped using marijuana and cocaine completely in college," when in fact Obama has made clear in his first book and subsequently that he stopped using drugs when he transferred to Columbia University for his junior year in college.

The book is filled with such factual errors. It is hard to attribute them to carelessness because all the errors distort Obama's life, views, writings, and political career in ways obviously intended to hurt the candidate's reputation.

Simon & Schuster selected *Obama Nation* for major celebrity treatment, knowing that the book was written by an author with a well-deserved reputation for falsehoods. What, if any, responsibility do publishers have when dealing with a book and an author like this? Given the controversy over Corsi's previous book, should Simon & Schuster have hired a fact-checker to make sure that *Obama Nation*, which they are promoting as "non-fiction," was reasonably accurate?

What responsibility, if any, do publishers and booksellers have in calling the book a "best-seller" when that label may be as fictitious as the information contained in the book itself?

Indeed, the *New York Times* currently lists *Obama Nation* as its #1 "best seller" even though the paper acknowledges that sales of the book have been influenced by "bulk orders." Does the paper have a responsibility to find out whether these included large purchases by the author or by right-wing organizations?

As the publisher notes on its corporate website, "In all, Simon & Schuster titles have received 54 Pulitzer Prizes, 15 National Book Awards, 14 Caldecott and 18 Newbery Medals." But the company clearly didn't have a Pulitzer Prize or National Book Award in mind when it decided to publish Corsi's book. It did so under its new Threshold Editions imprint which, under the direction of hard-nosed Republican operative Mary Matalin, is dedicated to recruiting conservative writers. Other publishers have conservative imprints -- such as Random House's Crown Forum and Penguin's Centinel -- but Simon & Schuster is the first to employ a high-profile right-wing politico to sit in editorial judgment of what books should and shouldn't be published.

"Mary is very well-connected," Threshold spokesperson Jean Anne Rose told me. So far, Matalin's connections have netted Simon & Schuster some big-name right-wing authors, including Bush's controversial former UN Ambassador John Bolton, former Reagan economic advisor Arthur Laffer, Second Lady Lynne Cheney, former GOP chairman Ed Gillespie, right-wing TV talkmeister Glen Beck, and Bush political advisor Karl Rove.

Simon & Schuster's website describes *Obama Nation* as a "thoroughly researched and documented book." Matalin told the *New York Times* that the book "was not designed to be, and does not set out to be, a political book." She even called the book, which is little more than a hate-filled political hatchet job, "a piece of scholarship, and a good one at that." Asked about the many falsehoods in the book, Threshold Editions spokesperson Rose said that the book provides a useful service by assembling "all the criticisms of Obama in one place."

"It isn't likely that publishers will start their own fact-checking departments," said Sara Nelson, editor in chief of Publishers Weekly. "But whatever a book's political view, publishers have a responsibility, to the best of their ability, to make sure that what are claimed to be facts are true."

It is obvious that Simon & Schuster wasn't focused on the truthfulness of Corsi's book when it decided, upon Matalin's recommendation, not only to publish the book but also to spend a bundle marketing it. Over the past few weeks, Corsi has been a constant presence on TV and radio talk shows. The book is prominently displayed in major bookstores, especially big national chains. Walk into any Borders bookstore and you'll find *Obama Nation* prominently displayed on the front table with a 30% discount. One Borders bookstore manager explained that this high-profile promotion is a "corporate decision" made in Borders' Ann Arbor headquarters. Anthony Ziccardi, vice president for sales for Pocket Books and Threshold Editions, confirmed that Simon & Schuster paid Borders, Barnes & Noble, and other retailers a two-week fee to display the Corsi book in the most prominent location in each of its stores in order to boost sales. This is standard procedure in the publishing/bookselling industry.

Most stores, including big chains like Borders and Barnes & Noble, and the dwindling number of independent bookstores, have put *Obama Nation* on their "best seller" shelves or identify it as a "best seller." This week it ranks #1 on the New York Times best-seller list, #2 on Publishers Weekly's list, #12 on USA Today's list (but #2 among non-fiction books), and #6 on the American Booksellers Association list among independent (non-chain) bookstores. Among regional lists, *Obama Nation* ranked #2 on the Washington Post list and #10 on the Los Angeles Times list. (It didn't crack the top ten on the Boston Globe list). It is also the most popular non-fiction book sold on Amazon.com.

But is *Obama Nation* really a best-seller? The *New York Times* puts a dagger next to some books, indicating that "some bookstores report receiving bulk orders." Among the Times' top 16 non-fiction books for August 24, three others -- *Stori Telling*, a memoir by actress Tori Spelling (#3), *The Case Against Barack Obama* by David Freddoso, published by Regnery (#5), and *Fleeced*, another anti-Obama book by conservative political operative and pundit Dick Morris and coauthor Eileen McGann (#8) -- have similar daggers.

The other major best-seller lists don't have comparable designations, but the sales figures reported by their sample of booksellers can also be influenced by bulk orders.

The *New York Times* best-seller list, the most prestigious, is based on weekly sales reports from national samples of independent and chain bookstores, online booksellers, as well as wholesalers that provide books to other retailers like department stores and supermarkets. The *Times*' list of 4,000 sellers is a closely-guarded secret. Other best-seller lists use a different mix of chains, independents, on-line sellers, and wholesalers.

According to BookScan, a sales monitoring service, the Corsi book had sold about 100,000 copies in its first three weeks.

Shouldn't newspapers want to know -- about the Corsi book but all others as well -- what proportion of sales are influenced by bulk buying before they put them on their best-seller lists? Ziccardi acknowledged that one bookstore in the South sold 2,500 copies to one organization, but claimed that Simon & Schuster doesn't know how many of Corsi's books were purchased through bulk orders or whether any conservative groups were part of a bulk-order scheme. But it's difficult to believe that Matalin, a former aide to VP Dick Cheney, didn't use her connections to boost the sales of the book published under her imprint in this hotly-contested election season.

Shouldn't publications find out whether the author or interest groups are responsible for inflating a book's sales by this method, before they call a book a "best seller"?

Deborah Hofmann, who tracks book sales and assembles the best-seller list for the *New York Times*, did not return repeated calls seeking answers to these questions. But a staff-person at a major book review told me that while some publishers, authors and interest groups have learned how to "game the system" by orchestrating bulk orders in multiple locations, publications with best-seller lists, including the prestigious *New York Times*, don't make much effort to find out who is involved and how big an influence they have in inflating sales.

Nelson, of Publishers Weekly, explained that publications with best seller lists could ask bookstores to identify how much of a book's total sales are due to this practice. "This information is knowable," she said, acknowledging that her own publication does not seek this information.

One book review staffer observed that conservative activist groups and book clubs are more effective than their liberal counterparts at jacking up sales figures through bulk buying.

The current *New York Times* best-seller list seems to confirm his observation. Four conservative books -- by Corsi, Feddoso, and Morris and McGann, plus *The Revolution*, a libertarian manifesto by former Presidential candidate Ron Paul, currently listed at #21 -- all come with daggers indicating that sales figures have been influenced by bulk orders. The eight books on the list that are critical of the Bush administration -- Ron Suskind's *The Way of the World* (#3), Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side* (#7), Vincent Bugliosi's *The Prosecution of George W. Bush for Murder* (#10), Thomas Frank's *The Wrecking Crew* (#11), former Bush press secretary Scott McClellan's *What Happened?* (#19), Nancy Pelosi's *Know Your Power* (#23) and Stephen Colbert's *I Am America* (#29) -- are dagger-less.

Five years ago, on August 10, 2003, the *New York Times* listed Hillary Clinton's autobiography, *Living History*, published by Simon & Schuster, as the #2 best-seller, followed by Ann Coulter's *Treason*, published by Random House's conservative imprint, Crown Forum. The Clinton book was dagger-free, while Coulter's book, which allegedly dissected "liberal treachery from the cold war to the war on terrorism," had the dagger next to it.

Most of the more popular liberal books of recent years, such as books by celebrities like Bill Clinton and Al Franken, didn't reach the Times' best-seller list with a dagger, although one of Michael Moore's books, *Stupid White Men*, was dagged as a paperback for four of the 37 weeks it was on the *New York Times* list in 2002. *Stupid White Men* was a dagger-less hardcover best-seller for 59 weeks (50 of them consecutive) before it was available in paperback. According to Eric Weinrib, editor of michaelmoore.com, the dagger appeared for the paperback when professors began including the book on the reading lists for college courses and universities placed bulk orders as a result. "We have NEVER organized a buyout of books to trick up the list -- because we don't have to," Weinrib wrote in an email commenting on this story.\*

The *New York Times* has not affixed a dagger to Obama's memoir *The Audacity of Hope*, which had a long run on the hardback best-seller list and has been on the paperback best-seller list (now ranked #4) for 33 weeks, nor to his previous memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, which is now in its 108th week on the paperback best-seller list. None of the various memoirs and autobiographies coauthored by John McCain and his staffer Mark Salter -- *Faith of My Fathers* (1999), *Worth the Fighting For* (2002), *Why Courage Matters* (2004), and *Hard Call* (2007) -- have had daggers. This suggests that neither campaign nor their supporters sought to "game" the system on behalf of the candidates' own books.

(*Faith of My Fathers* was recently re-released to coincide with McCain's campaign. Obama's campaign book, *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise*, will be published by Crown on Sept. 9, with a first printing of 300,000 copies).

Next week, Chelsea Green, a small Vermont-based publisher, is releasing *Obama's Challenge: America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency* by journalist Robert Kuttner. To promote the book, Chelsea Green has arranged to give delegates and other participants at the Democratic Party convention in Denver a large discount. But groups that support Obama -- like MoveOn, labor unions, and environmental and women's rights groups -- aren't making bulk purchases, according to Margo Baldwin, Chelsea Green's president.

Although Baldwin calls it a "pro-Obama" book, it is certainly not the liberal parallel to Corsi's hate-filled attack. Kuttner's book is not a valentine to Obama, but a serious political analysis of the potential -- and pitfalls -- of an Obama presidency. Kuttner, founding editor of the liberal magazine *American Prospect* and a former columnist for *Business Week*, has authored numerous books on politics and economic policy. *Obama's Challenge* includes a progressive policy prescription as well as a warning to progressives that the success of an Obama administration -- and his potential to be a "transformational" president like FDR or Ronald Reagan -- will depend partly on his own leadership, and partly on the ability of liberal groups to mount a persistent grassroots organizing, lobbying, and opinion-shaping effort to push both Obama and Democrats in Congress to resist pressure from big business and its allies to adopt centrist policies.

Kuttner's serious book is meant to be read, discussed, and debated. In contrast, Corsi's book is meant to be a totem for right-wing talk shows, bloggers, and columnists, and an opportunity to get its author on the conservative lecture and talk-show circuit and even, as happened last week, on CNN's "Larry King Live" show. The challenge to which Kuttner refers is for Obama to appeal to what is most noble in American democracy. Corsi's book appeals to our most sordid instincts.

Like most politically-oriented books that make the best-seller lists in part through bulk sales, *Obama Nation* is most likely being purchased by people who already agree with the book's perspective. It isn't going to persuade any voters who are undecided between Obama and McCain. It is meant, rather, to contribute to the right-wing echo chamber to whip up conservative true-believers and to provide credibility to a book that would otherwise belong to the lunatic fringe.

"Its too bad that a publisher of Simon & Schuster's stature would call this a scholarly book," said Peter Osnos, the founder and editor of PublicAffairs Books, which publishes serious books on political topics. But, he added, "the book's contents aren't important on their own. Obviously the publisher wants to make money. But the book is intended to stir controversy, and allow people like Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly to tout the book. That's more important than the sales of the book."

Indeed, the controversy around *Obama Nation* -- the time and effort required by the Obama campaign to rebut Corsi's falsehoods, the attention its getting on Fox News and its conservative media counterparts, the publicity the contretemps has generated in the mainstream media (including a [front-page article](#) in the August 13 New York Times), and the legions of articles (like this one) about the book generated through the blogosphere -- is

exactly the impact that Corsi, Matalin, and (directly or indirectly) the McCain campaign and its allies had hoped for.

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**\*NOTE:** Eric Weinrib wrote in with a correction of an earlier version of this piece. His concerns are now reflected above. The original paragraph that mentioned Michael Moore read: *Most of the more popular liberal books of recent years, such as books by celebrities like Bill Clinton and Al Franken, didn't reach the Times' best-seller list with a dagger, although one of Michael Moore's books, Stupid White Men, was daggered for four of the 37 weeks it was on the New York Times list in 2002.*