

On Foes, Friends and Fans: Last Rites for Alexander Cockburn
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Most of us have had the experience of encountering a movie star or TV personality in public, greeting them as a friend or acquaintance and then realizing to our chagrin that this person obviously has no idea who we are.

Something of the same thing goes for well known literary figures who routinely receive marriage proposals, requests for financial assistance or relationship advice from total strangers.

It is easy to imagine that Alexander Cockburn received plenty of these from readers. Few writers were as able to take down apologists for imperial plunder and the ever tightening grip of neo-liberalism. That he routinely did so with a few pitch perfect salvos to the targets' solar plexus made him seem like a big brother dispatching the neighborhood bully. And it was based on our personal affinity for him why some of us attended his memorial in Brooklyn last month despite our never having once met him in person.

It didn't come as a surprise to hear many anecdotes attesting to Alex's personal warmth, charm, humor and charisma, though a few also suggested that being Alex's friend carried with it some element of strain. In particular, there was the matter of the small but not insignificant number of crackpot positions which he had taken over the years. The most notable of these was his denialist stance on climate change, one which even his closest friends made mention of at the memorial. But there were others as well, extending from his insistence that the Lascaux cave paintings were fakes to his attempts to whitewash the history of his father Claud Cockburn whose Stalinist apologetics were memorably exposed in Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.

Those who had a personal relationship with Alex were sometimes found twisting themselves into pretzels to find an underlying logic to these positions or simply denying their existence. Fans of Alex did not feel any obligation to do so, and it was a relief not to have to engage in the necessary contortions.

Attending the memorial was also useful for clarifying a social fact which needs to be better understood by those of us on the left which is that, while somewhat blurred in Alex's case, a different set of rules applies to friends and fans. For example, friends can reasonably expect that personal email messages will be answered; fans shouldn't expect to receive similar treatment, as Alex's did not. On the other hand, that there are narrow boundaries imposed on what friends can say to each other and remain friends is obvious. These don't apply to fans, and neither Alex, nor any celebrity with a fan base should have any expectation that they would.

In particular, a fan is more or less within his rights to boo the star outfielder when he

strikes out for the home team. Whereas most baseball players learn how to accept the loudmouth behind home plate with equanimity, Alex, like most left media figures was not particularly grateful when lapses in fact or interpretation were brought to his attention by his fans. (Though he was a model of grace compared to his successors in the Counterpunch franchise-as I discovered recently.)

The larger point here is that however prickly or even nasty the reception which these criticisms are likely to receive, we shouldn't shy away from issuing them. For if we don't insist that those who create the public face of the left do so responsibly we can be sure that the defenders of empire, exploitation, and environmental pillage and will make hay from what they find there as further confirmation of the left's intellectual sloth, deep seated irrationality and lack of seriousness. Alex's dalliances with global warming denialism, shrugged off by him and his defenders, did significant damage not only to his credibility but to the reputation of the broader left whose on line identity was, to some extent, defined by what appeared at Counterpunch. "That's the site run by that crank Cockburn," was the grounds for why an NPR liberal friend of mind didn't both to read a piece by Dean Baker I referred him to on Counterpunch, and unfortunately, he was right.

We shouldn't be deterred from calling out left journalists, commentators and artists by the illusion that are in any way our friends or even very sympathetic individuals despite their being on our side. Some of them are perfectly pleasant some of the time, some of them nice guys all of the time, some are flaming assholes. That is entirely irrelevant to most of us whose only experience with their personalities will be in print.

Having said that, it needs to be stressed that any criticism of a comrade needs to be issued with a maximum of sensitivity and tact. That goes double for those attempting to follow in Alex's footsteps: now more than ever devoting oneself to left journalism's traditional role of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable means, as Alex's former co-editor Ken Silverstein noted at the memorial, a string of marginally remunerative positions at alternative on line outlets, at best, complete destitution at worst.

We also need to have some sympathy towards those who have managed to find some mechanism to monetize the kind of writing which many of us do on an unpaid basis. Unlike the corporate right and liberal left who move from media outlets, to corporate think tanks to policy or campaign positions within the two parties, those of us on the left fly without a net. Falling off our perches, particularly for those without family resources or other means of support, can amount to a financial catastrophe.

These unpleasant realities explain why a specific type of criticism is sure to wound: that a journalist has sold out, that is, tailored reporting towards advancing within the profession. Still more unpleasant is that the more insecure the economic circumstances of journalists, the more likely the charge is to be on target. Even in the past, when the system made available far more niches of the sort which Alex had thrived within, there are numerous examples of sell-outs. Two examples will be sufficient to illustrate the

point : Fox News Anchor Britt Hume, who began his career as for the iconic left monthly Ramparts and Judith Miller who filed her first stories at New York's Pacifica Affilliate, WBAI, though the list could be continued almost indefinitely with names such as Hitchens, Walzer, Horowitz, even former Young Lord Geraldo Rivera.

Now, with a few media conglomerates in almost total control of paying positions within journalism industry, even the most principled radical journalists can be predicted to pull their punches on occasion, or at worst, cook the books to conform to the mainstream narrative. Even when these capitulations instances are advanced by those with a long standing track record they need called out early and often, respectfully, but firmly. Doing so does not make you lots of friends-as anyone who does the job will soon discover.

Alex Cockburn seemed to be endowed virtually from birth with the ability to assemble words that lodge in the mind and the heart, and which, at best, spurred us to act. It is to our great benefit that, by and large, he put his rare gifts in the service of the left. That was not the case for the whole family: Alex's niece, Stephanie Flanders, might be said to have gone over to the dark side having served as a speech writer for Larry Summers. Another niece, the movie star Olivia Wilde has emerged as a conventionally tedious Hollywood liberal, having enlisted enthusiastically in the Obama campaign and, in a recent appearance on The Daily Show speaking glowingly of the "brilliance" and of her former baby sitter Christopher Hitchens. Niece Laura Flanders while seeing herself as continuing Alex's legacy is problematic in her commitment to a tepid Nation magazine Democratic Party centric variant of leftism, rising at the Nation as Alex's star waned.

All of this is much more than anyone who didn't know them personally needs to know about the Cockburn clan. There is no reason why we should care any more about them than we do about a Pakistani child blown up in a drone strike ordered by the candidate who most of the celebrity left media uncritically (or at best insufficiently critically) supported.

We should celebrate Alex's achievements, and those of any other journalist committed to telling the truth. But we should let them know when they get it wrong. Whether or not we will be seen by them as "assholes" in doing so, as one of them recently referred to me, it's a job which needs to be done.