

## **Commentary: Fear and loathing In Miami**

December 15, 2003 By: John Gorman

As the shouting in the streets is replaced by pleadings in the courtrooms, it is safe to say that Miami will be paying some hefty court settlements and judgments in the wake of the police state tactics its officers used to quell dissent last month.

Furious over the city's handling of the protests during the Free Trade Area of the Americas conference, the ACLU and the AFL-CIO already are rolling out their legal cannons. While Police Chief John Timoney may be Miami's man of the hour now, he likely will become the regime's scapegoat as the legal battles wear on. Elected officials who are now standing behind him will beat a hasty retreat.

But another culprit will probably escape any reproach, let alone punishment, for these outrages - the media. Across the continent, newspapers assured the public that tens of thousands of demonstrators were determined to disrupt negotiations on trade among the 34 western hemispheric democracies. Scary photos of masked marauders rampaging through the streets were standard illustrations.

The thought that the vast majority of those demonstrators had nothing more in mind than the exercise of their constitutionally protected right to speak their minds and petition for the redress of grievances never occurred to these reporters, editors and pundits.

Local TV stations were even worse offenders. Clips of the disturbances in Seattle were shown over and over on the evening news. Also frequently aired were sound bites promising destruction from the most outlandish looking among the prospective protesters, who were persistently identified as "anarchists" - although I heard none refer to themselves by that term.

Meanwhile, professors, clerics, union members, retirees and other more mainstream participants were hardly ever shown or interviewed. After a few weeks of this conditioning, it's not hard to understand how the public might have concluded that Miami was about to be invaded by a hostile aliens from the planet Anarchy - rather than fellow Americans wanting only to express their peaceful disapproval of a plan they believed would do them and their children serious economic and environmental harm.

The program published by the "civil society" groups organizing the protests made it clear that demonstrations and marches composed only a small portion of the week's scheduled events. There were far more meetings, forums, teach-ins, workshops and other gatherings, where people could discuss subjects like corporate globalization and environmental dangers.

As far as I could determine, however, the media were notable by their absence from these talky assemblies, having found street commotions so much more exciting.

Miami New Times, the alternative newsweekly, provided some analysis of the issues, as did the Daily Business Review. New Times provided no information about where the civil society alternative gatherings were being held, and what subjects would be considered, though the Daily Business Review did provide such information.

### Demonizing free speech

If there was any consistent message sent out by the media, it was to demonize the protesters, and, by implication, protest itself. That's a rather strange activity for institutions that depend for their professional existence on the First Amendment. To hear the media tell it, anyone going downtown during those days was asking for trouble and should not complain if he or she found some.

It's safe to say that police officers read newspapers and watch TV like the rest of us, and they have no immunity to media fear mongering. It's quite possible that many of them sincerely believed from what they read and watched that they were being sent into desperate battle against a savage horde bent on the ruin of civilization.

Their built-up anxiety and anger - fed by the antics of a few itinerant street skirmishers, as well as Chief Timoney's harangues - found an outlet in assaults on peaceful demonstrators who had no thought of being violent themselves.

Once the media found their own minions among the arrested, bruised, beaten and - in the case of professional photographer Carl Kesser - nearly killed, some reporters and pundits began to treat the police response to the protests with greater skepticism.

While the Herald ran a full page "community announcement" celebrating the "success" of the FTAA conference on Nov. 23, Miami New Times has published several strong stories detailing police mistreatment of its reporter and other people who were unwise enough to be downtown during these Days of (Police) Rage.

But the media have yet to examine their own agent provocateur role in these disturbances. It remains to be seen whether they are capable of learning anything that might help them cover the next mass protest more responsibly.

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