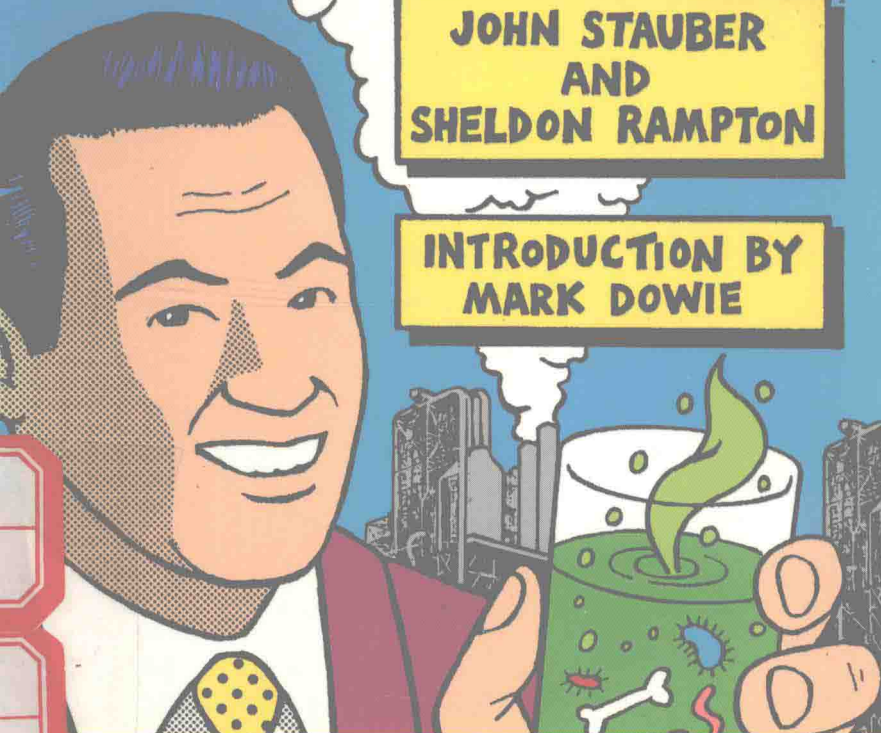


TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU!

**LIES, DAMN LIES
AND THE PUBLIC
RELATIONS INDUSTRY**

**JOHN STAUBER
AND
SHELDON RAMPTON**

**INTRODUCTION BY
MARK DOWIE**



...rific! Don't miss it."

—Molly Ivins

**Toxic Sludge
Is Good for You**
**LIES, DAMN LIES AND THE
Public Relations Industry**

BY
JOHN C. STAUBER
AND
SHELDON RAMPTON

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Also by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber

Mad Cow USA: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?

"A chilling, revealing book about what really goes on behind the scenes in the meat industry. Every American family ought to read this book."—Jeremy Rifkin, author of *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*

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INTRODUCTION

TORCHES of LIBERTY

by Mark Dowie

On the surface it seemed like an ordinary publicity stunt for “female emancipation,” the pre-Depression equivalent of women’s liberation. A contingent of New York debutantes marched down Fifth Avenue in the 1929 Easter Parade, each openly lighting and smoking cigarettes. It was the first time in the memory of most Americans that any woman who wasn’t a prostitute had been seen smoking in public.

It was dubbed the “torches of liberty contingent” by Edward Bernays, its brilliant behind-the-scenes organizer. Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, later admitted that he had been paid a tidy sum to orchestrate the march by George Washington Hill, president of the American Tobacco Company. But long before the public learned who had engineered the parade, it had achieved its goal of breaking the taboo against female smoking. Within months, in fact, the politest of American ladies were puffing in public and sales of Hill’s Lucky Strikes were soaring.

The event is still hailed in public relations lore as a “triumph.” Some people consider it *the* coup that launched a whole new, distinctively American industry.

Most of us are aware of public relations. “That’s just a lot of PR,” we say, with smug confidence that we have pierced the veil of hype around us rather than be taken in by some anonymous huckster. But few outside the public relations industry know how well PR

really works, and fewer still realize how often we are persuaded by it. Nor do many of us know how much of our “news” and other information originates from the desks of public relations practitioners. “The best PR is never noticed,” says the proud unwritten slogan of the trade.

The sad truth, which this book amply documents, is that PR executives are today mediating public communications as never before. “Flacks” are no longer mere authors of press memos, “video news releases” and pre-packaged articles used by lazy reporters and editors. Nor are they simply “builders of bridges into prosperity . . . in a fly-by-night, flim-flam business,” as theatrical publicist Ben Sonnenberg once described his chosen profession. That too we now accept about PR. But the intricate practice of relating to the public has evolved even further and requires the kind of close examination that John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton provide.

PR has become a communications medium in its own right, an industry designed to alter perception, reshape reality and manufacture consent. It is run by a fraternity carefully organized so that only insiders can observe their peers at work. Veteran PR professionals can read the front page of almost any newspaper in the country, or watch a segment of broadcast news and identify which of their peers “placed,” “handled” or “massaged” a specific story—even which executives arranged the “placement,” managed the “spin” or wrote the CEO’s quotes. But can you or I? Or do we assume, as we are supposed to, that some dogged reporter, trained and determined to be the objective “eyes and ears of the public,” set out to research, investigate and report his or her findings as accurately as possible?

This book is of particular interest to me as a journalist, not only because I spend so much of my time on the phone with “communications directors,” “public information officers” and “community relations liaisons,” but also because about a third of America’s currently practicing PR men and women began their careers as journalists, where they learned how to investigate people and institutions, how newsrooms work and how to write a compelling and informative story. In a strange way many of them still *are* journalists. Academicians who study media now estimate that about 40% of all “news” flows virtually unedited from the public relations offices, prompting a prominent PR exec to boast that “the best PR ends up looking like news.”

Also disconcerting is the fact that the 150,000 PR practitioners in the US outnumber the country’s 130,000 reporters (and with the

media downsizing its newsrooms, the gap is widening). Furthermore, some of the country's best journalism schools now send more than half their graduates directly into public relations (an almost traitorous career choice to traditionalists like myself who instruct students how to handle PR executives and circumvent the barriers they erect between the truth and the story they want told about their clients).

With media becoming dependent on PR for more and more of its content, public relations executives have become inordinately powerful. Even the most energetic reporters know that they have to be somewhat deferential in the presence of a powerful publicist. No one on a national beat can afford to get on the wrong side of a Frank Mankiewicz or a Harold Burson knowing that their firms (Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller) together represent a third of the most quotable sources in the country.



People often equate public relations with the advertising industry, and in fact almost every major Madison Avenue agency, from J. Walter Thompson to Young & Rubicam, owns or is paired with a large PR firm. But PR firms carry out activities that are often considerably more secretive and sinister than designing clever slogans and video imagery. The modern "account" managed by a PR/advertising giant can now package a global campaign that includes a strategic blend of "paid media" (advertising) and "free media" (public relations). Add to that some of the other standard services offered by most PR firms—including "crisis management," industrial espionage, organized censorship and infiltration of civic and political groups—and you have a formidable combination of persuasive techniques available to large corporations and anyone else who can afford to hire the services of a PR firm. You know you're looking at propaganda when you open your newspaper and notice an ad for General Electric, but you're less likely to notice the rest of the mix—the story about GE that appears on page one, which may well have been placed by the same firm that placed the ad, and may in addition have deployed a private investigator to infiltrate and subvert the efforts of an activist organization attempting to combat GE's environmental practices. The independence of the press, already challenged by the influence of Madison Avenue, is now being further compromised by the interdependence of advertising and PR.

Corporations use the term "integrated communications" to describe this massive institutional meld, and its consequences are

profound. The methods of modern advertising, steeped in subliminal psychology and imagery aimed at the subconscious, have proven themselves effective at selling cars, mouthwash and cigarettes. Today similar methods are used almost reflexively to promote and protect ideas, policies, candidates, ideologies, tyrants and hazardous products. As propaganda, once the honorable purview of speechwriters, editorialists and orators, bypasses the conscious mind and is targeted at the subconscious, the consequences for culture, democracy and public health are staggering to contemplate.

As Stauber and Rampton clearly demonstrate in chapter after chapter of this book, a single public relations professional with access to media, a basic understanding of mass psychology and a fistful of dollars can unleash in society forces that make permanent winners out of otherwise-evident losers—whether they be products, politicians, corporations or ideas. This is an awesome power we give to an industry that gravitates to wealth, offers surplus power and influence to those who need it least, and operates largely beyond public view.

It is critical that consumers of media in democratic societies understand the origin of information and the process by which it is mediated, particularly when they are being deceived. Thus it is essential that they understand public relations. By offering between-the-lines analysis of PR's role in some of the most important stories of our time, this book leaves its readers with a much better sense of what is genuine. By deconstructing the modern triumphs of PR, it also shows how objective inquiry becomes subsumed by manufactured information, which either changes the public's perception of an event or the outcome of the event itself. In such an environment, facts cannot survive, nor can truth prevail.

Mark Dowie, a former publisher and editor of Mother Jones magazine, is the recipient of 14 major journalism awards, including an unprecedented three National Magazine awards.

CHAPTER ONE

BURNING BOOKS BEFORE THEY'RE PRINTED

Who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God's Image; but he who destroys a good Book, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God.

JOHN MILTON
Areopagitica

"All documents . . . are confidential," warned the September 7, 1990 memo from Betsy Gullickson, senior vice-president at the giant Ketchum public relations firm. "Make sure that everything—even notes to yourself—are so stamped. . . . Remember that we have a shredder; give documents to Lynette for shredding. All conversations are confidential, too. Please be careful talking in the halls, in elevators, in restaurants, etc. All suppliers must sign confidentiality agreements. If you are faxing documents to the client, another office or to anyone else, call them to let them know that a fax is coming. If you are expecting a fax, you or your Account Coordinator should stand by the machine and wait for it. We don't want those documents lying around for anybody to pick up."¹

Gullickson, a 1969 graduate of Northwestern University's prestigious Medill School of Journalism,² understood perfectly the need for secrecy. If word leaked out, the media might have had a field day with Ketchum's plan to scuttle a groundbreaking environmental book even before it went to press.

The stakes were high for Ketchum's client, the California Raisin Advisory Board (CALRAB), the business association of California raisin growers. In 1986, CALRAB had scored big with a series of

clever TV commercials using the "California Dancing Raisins." The singing, dancing raisins, animated through a technique known as "claymation," were so popular that they had transcended their TV-commercial origins. Fan mail addressed to the Raisins was forwarded to Ketchum, along with phone inquiries from the media and public clamoring for live public performances. Ketchum obligingly supplied live, costumed characters dressed as the Raisins, who performed at the White House Easter Egg Roll and Christmas Tree Lighting, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and "A Claymation Christmas Celebration" on the CBS television network.

In the summer of 1988, the Raisins were sent out on a 27-city national tour, beginning in New York and ending in Los Angeles. Along the way, they performed in hotel lobbies, children's hospitals and convalescent centers and supermarkets. In several cities, they were greeted by the mayor and given keys to the city. They visited historic landmarks, singing and dancing their version of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." They performed at a charity benefit honoring singer Ray Charles and his claymation counterpart, "Raisin Ray." Over 3,000 people joined the California Dancing Raisins Fan Club, and a research poll found that the Raisins were second in popularity only to comedian Bill Cosby.³

For CALRAB, of course, the real payoff came in raisin sales, which had risen 17 percent since the Dancing Raisins were first introduced. Behind the scenes, however, trouble was brewing, and Gullickson's secret memo outlined Ketchum's plan to "manage the crisis."

The "crisis" was a science writer named David Steinman. In 1985 while working for the *LA Weekly*, Steinman had written a story about fish contaminated from toxic waste dumped near his home in the Santa Monica Bay area, and was shocked when a test of his own blood showed astronomical levels of both DDT and PCBs. Steinman had read the research linking these chemicals to higher rates of cancer and other diseases, and started "wondering how many other poisons were in the food I ate. It started me asking why government officials, who had known about the dumping for years, had withheld the information for so long." In his search for the answers to these questions, Steinman began a five-year investigation, using the Freedom of Information Act to obtain obscure government research reports. Based on this research, he had written a book, titled *Diet for a Poisoned Planet*, scheduled for publication in 1990.

Steinman's investigation had uncovered evidence showing that hundreds of toxic carcinogens and other contaminants, mostly

pesticides, are found routinely in US foods from raisins to yogurt to beef. For example, government inspectors found "raisins had 110 industrial chemical and pesticide residues in sixteen samples." *Diet for a Poisoned Planet* recommends that people avoid any but organically-grown raisins raised without pesticides.⁴

By compiling this information in book form, *Diet for a Poisoned Planet* enables readers to make safer food choices. But before shoppers can use the information, they must first hear about the book, through media reviews and interviews with the author during a publicity campaign in the weeks after the book is published. And the California Raisin Advisory Board wanted to make sure that Steinman's book was dead on arrival.

PR firms, of course, are the experts at organizing publicity campaigns. So who better to launch an *anti*-publicity campaign, to convince journalists to ignore Steinman and his book?

For Spies' Eyes Only

Our copy of Betsy Gullickson's memo came from an employee of Ketchum PR. Despite the risk of being fired, conscience drove this corporate whistleblower to reveal Ketchum's campaign aimed at concealing the possible health risks from high pesticide levels in California raisins and other foods.

"I find it very discouraging when I read in the paper that cancer among children has increased dramatically, and they don't know why," our source explained. "I believe that people have the right to know about the little Dancing Raisins and the possibility that they might be harming children. There is a new censorship in this country, based on nothing but dollars and cents."

According to the 1994 *O'Dwyer's Directory of PR Firms*, Ketchum is the sixth largest public relations company in the United States, receiving net fees of over \$50 million per year. Headquartered in New York City, Ketchum represents a number of corporate food clients, including Dole Foods, Wendy's, the Potato Board, Oscar Mayer Foods, Miller Brewing, Kikkoman, H.J. Heinz, the Beef Industry Council, the California Almond Board, and the California Raisin Advisory Board.⁵ In addition to writing press releases and organizing news conferences, Ketchum aggressively markets its services in "crisis management," a growing specialty within the PR industry. In a profile written for *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report*, Ketchum boasted of its experience handling PR problems ranging "from toxic waste crises to low-level nuclear wastes, from community relations at Super-

fund sites to scientific meetings where issues like toxicology of pesticides are reviewed.”⁶

Gullickson’s PR expertise is in “food marketing strategic counsel,”⁷ and Steinman’s book is the type of “crisis” that she was hired to manage. Her memo outlined a plan to assign “broad areas of responsibility,” such as “intelligence/information gathering,” to specific Ketchum employees and to Gary Obenauf of CALRAB. Months before the publication of *Diet for a Poisoned Planet*, Ketchum sought to “obtain [a] copy of [the] book galleys or manuscript and publisher’s tour schedule.” Gullickson recommended that spokespeople “conduct one-on-one briefings/interviews with the trade and general consumer media in the markets most acutely interested in the issue. . . . The [Ketchum] agency is currently attempting to get a tour schedule so that we can ‘shadow’ Steinman’s appearances; best scenario: we will have our spokesman in town prior to or in conjunction with Steinman’s appearances.”⁸

To get this information, Ketchum used an informant involved with the book’s marketing campaign to tell them when and on which talk shows Steinman was booked. “They called up each and every talk show,” explained our source inside Ketchum. A “list of media to receive low-key phone inquiries regarding the Steinman book” included specific journalists at the *New York Times*, the Larry King Show, and the *Washington Post*. The callers from Ketchum argued that it would be unfair to allow Steinman on the show without the other side of the issue, or tried to depict him as an “off-the-wall extremist without credibility.”

Ketchum wasn’t the only PR firm working to cripple Steinman’s book publicity efforts. Jean Rainey of Edelman Public Relations contacted the *Today Show*, providing anti-Steinman material and offering to make available “the president of the American Dietetic Association” to counter Steinman. Apparently she succeeded in bouncing him from the program. *Today* interviewed Steinman, but never aired the segment.⁹

Government Moves to Suppress

Gullickson’s memo also suggested possible “external ambassadors” who might be recruited into the campaign, including Republican California Governor Pete Wilson and Democratic Party fundraiser Tony Coelho. Thanks to a pesticide industry front group with deep Republican connections, the stealth campaign against Steinman’s book even reached into the White House and other arms of the US government.

Elizabeth M. Whelan is a prominent anti-environmentalist who heads the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), a group funded largely by the chemical industry. The ACSH is also a client of Ketchum PR. On July 12, 1990, Whelan wrote a letter to then-White House Chief of Staff John Sununu warning that Steinman and others "who specialize in terrifying consumers" were "threatening the US standard of living and, indeed, may pose a future threat to national security." Whelan's letter was copied to the heads of the government's Food and Drug Administration, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health and Human Services, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Surgeon General. Whelan also contacted her friend, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, whom she calls a "close colleague."¹⁰ Dr. Koop joined the attack against Steinman's book, calling it "trash" in a statement mailed nationwide.¹¹

In September 1990, before Steinman's book was published, the USDA initiated its anti-book campaign through the Agriculture Extension Service. The federally-funded effort was led by government employees Kenneth Hall, Bonnie Poli, Cynthia Garman-Squier and Janet Poley. According to a government memo, the Department of Agriculture group felt that "communications with the media by concerned parties have been effective in minimizing potential public concern about issues in the book." Attached to the memo is a "confidential analysis" of Steinman's book written by the National Food Processors Association, a food and pesticide trade group. The memo warns recipients that this information is "for internal use and should not be released" to the news media.¹²

Dr. William Marcus, who was then a senior science advisor to the US Environmental Protection Agency, wrote the introduction to *Diet for a Poisoned Planet*. Marcus' views were his own, but they greatly angered Whelan. She asked White House Chief of Staff Sununu to personally investigate the matter, and exerted pressure to have the introduction removed from the book. Marcus refused, and was later fired from the EPA.¹³ Government policy has now been changed to prohibit officials from writing book forewords.

Deciding What You'll Swallow

You are probably going to eat some food today. It is possible, in fact, that you are in the process of eating *right now*.

You have the right to eat. You have the right to eat wholesome foods. You have the right to read, even while you are eating. You have the right to read *about* the foods you are about to eat. Neither

Ketchum Public Relations nor the White House has any right to interfere with your access to good food or good reading materials.

You have never voted for a politician who campaigned on a pledge that he would work to limit your access to information about the food you eat. You never voted for Ketchum PR, and, if you are like most people, you've never even *heard* of them. You never gave your consent for them to become involved in your life, and in return, they have never bothered to *ask* for your consent. After all, they're not working for *you*. They're working for the California Raisin Advisory Board.

One of the most cherished freedoms in a democracy is the right to freely participate in the "marketplace of ideas." We value this freedom because without it, all our other freedoms are impossible to defend. In a democracy every idea, no matter how absurd or offensive, is allowed to compete freely for our attention and acceptance. Turn on the TV, and you'll find plenty of absurd and offensive examples of this principle in action. On the Sunday public affairs shows you'll find Republicans, Democrats, Republicans who love too much, and Democrats who love Republicans. On "A Current Affair" or "Oprah Winfrey," you'll find self-proclaimed werewolves, worshippers of Madonna, and doomsday prophets from the lunatic fringes of American society.

Unfortunately, what you *won't* find can kill you.

Diet for a Poisoned Planet is a serious, important contribution to the public debate over health, the environment, and food safety. It fell victim to a PR campaign designed to prevent it from ever *reaching* the "marketplace of ideas." And it isn't alone. Here are some other examples:

- In 1992, John Robbins was promoting his book, *May All Be Fed*, which advocates a strict vegetarian diet. He became the target of an anti-book campaign by Morgan & Myers PR, working on behalf of the world's largest milk promotion group, the National Dairy Board. Based in Jefferson, Wisconsin, Morgan & Myers is the nation's 42nd largest PR firm, with about sixty employees and a 1993 net fee intake of \$3.7 million. Within its field of specialization—representing agribusiness interests—Morgan & Myers ranks fifth in the United States. Its clients include Kraft, the Philip Morris subsidiary that buys and sells most of America's cheese; Upjohn, a major producer of antibiotics used on livestock; and Sandoz, a manufacturer of atrazine herbicide, a carcinogen that contaminates thousands of water wells.¹⁴

THIS MODERN WORLD

by Tom Tomorrow

IT'S TIME FOR YET ANOTHER LOOK AT HOW THE NEWS WORKS...**STEP ONE:** A CORPORATION WHICH HAS BEEN CAUGHT ENGAGING IN SOME ILLEGAL OR UNETHICAL ACT HIRES A **PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRM**...



...AS WELL AS SENDING OUT SLICKLY-PRODUCED "VIDEO NEWS RELEASES" WHICH MANY CASH-STRAPPED LOCAL NEWS DEPARTMENTS AIR VIRTUALLY **UNEDITED**...GIVING CORPORATE PROPAGANDA THE APPEARANCE OF **OBJECTIVE REPORTING**...



STEP TWO: THE P.R. FIRM PROCEEDS TO MANIPULATE PUBLIC OPINION IN A VARIETY OF DEVIANT, UNDERHANDED WAYS-- SUCH AS ANONYMOUSLY PLANTING OP-ED PIECES IN THE NATION'S **NEWSPAPERS**...



STEP THREE: PUBLIC OPINION IS **SWAYED** BY THIS ONSLAUGHT OF MEDIA MANIPULATION MASQUERADING AS **NEWS**...SINCE, AS P.R. FIRMS WELL UNDERSTAND, ANY LIE REPEATED **OF-TEN** ENOUGH BECOMES **TRUE**...



As with Ketchum's California Raisins campaign, Morgan & Myers used behind-the-scenes contacts to undermine Robbins' publicity tour, thereby limiting his book's public exposure and readership. A Morgan & Myers memo of September 17, 1992, states that "M&M currently is monitoring coverage of Robbins' media tour," to counter his advice that readers cut back their consumption of dairy products. The memo was widely distributed to key dairy industry contacts. It contained the schedule of Robbins' book tour and provided this tactical warning: "Do not issue any news release or statement. Doing so only calls attention to his message. . . . Ideally, any response should come from a third party, uninvolved in the dairy industry."¹⁵

- The September 22, 1981, *Washington Post* reported that "a single telephone call from a DuPont public relations man to the Book-of-the-Month Club financially doomed an unflattering history of the

DuPont family and its businesses.” The book by author Gerard Colby Zilg, titled *DuPont: Behind the Nylon Curtain*, was a “relentlessly critical” exposé of the business and personal affairs of the wealthy DuPont family. After a copy of the manuscript found its way into the hands of the DuPonts, they deployed PR representative Harold G. Brown Jr., who phoned the Book-of-the-Month Club editor to say that several people at DuPont considered the book “scurrilous” and “actionable.”

The Book-of-the-Month Club had already contracted with Prentice-Hall, the publisher, to feature *DuPont* as a November selection of its Fortune Book Club, but a few days after Brown’s phone call the club called Prentice-Hall to back out of the deal. Apparently intimidated by the implied threat of a DuPont lawsuit, Prentice-Hall made no effort to enforce its contract with the Book-of-the-Month Club or to seek money damages. Instead, the publisher reduced the book’s press run from 15,000 to 10,000 copies, and cut its advertising budget from \$15,000 to \$5,500, even though the book was getting favorable reviews in major publications. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, called it “a vastly readable book and . . . a very important one.” Peter Grenquist, president of Prentice-Hall’s trade book division, ordered the book’s editor, Bram Cavin, not to discuss the matter with the author. In October, three months later, conscience finally drove Cavin to disobey Grenquist’s order and inform the author of the phone call from DuPont. Cavin was later fired for being “unproductive.”¹⁶

- PR firms also campaigned against the book *Beyond Beef*, by activist Jeremy Rifkin. *Beyond Beef* recommends that people stop eating beef for ethical, health and environmental reasons. Its message has been loudly denounced by both the Beef Council and the National Dairy Board, clients of Ketchum and Morgan & Myers, respectively. Rifkin’s enemies hired an infiltrator to pose as a volunteer in his office. The spy—Seymour “Bud” Vestermark, whose infiltrations of other organizations are detailed in chapter 5 of this book—obtained Rifkin’s book tour itinerary, after which all hell broke loose.¹⁷

In *The War Against The Greens*, author David Helvarg reports that Rifkin’s spring 1992 national book tour “had to be canceled after it was repeatedly sabotaged. Melinda Mullin, *Beyond Beef*’s publicist at Dutton Books, says . . . radio and TV producers who’d