

The Lace Curtain and *Good Will Toward Men*

Why you never heard of Jack Kammer's book
Good Will Toward Men:
Women Talk Candidly About the Balance of Power Between the Sexes,
a collection of interviews with twenty-two male-friendly women
(St. Martin's Press, 1994)

In his 1989 book *Gender Sanity*, Nicholas Davidson coined the term "Lace Curtain" to refer to the power and determination of feminists to quash publication of ideas of which they disapprove.

Here is how the Lace Curtain kept you from knowing the existence of *Good Will Toward Men*.

Baltimore Sun

I made these notes on the morning of March 5, 1994 to commemorate an interview I had with Jean Marbella of the *Baltimore Sun* on February 28, 1994.

Before Marbella started her interview I asked her what she thought of the book. She said that she had "a lot of problems with it," that she thought it was nothing but generalities and that you really can't say "men this" and "women that." I asked her whether she objected to general statements like "men earn more money than women." She said she did not, that there was much validity to such statements. I then suggested that her problem with the general observations in my book wasn't with the fact that they were general, but rather with the facts that they were general about. She had no response other than to turn away, shake her head and grimace in what I took to be the pain of one confronted with facts she found contrary to a cherished ideology. The interview went downhill from there.

She did not tape record the interview and took precious few notes and even fewer direct quotes (unless she knows a sophisticated and efficient form of shorthand, the possibility of which I recognize and hope for). After about ten minutes I was on the brink of canceling the interview because I had the distinct impression I was in for a "hatchet job," but I decided that canceling the interview would only give more heft to her axe.

At one point she began to yell and preach at me, rather than ask me questions or challenge me to substantiate my points. She was so agitated by what I was saying that she stopped taking notes altogether and gouged a dark, angry black form into her notepad with her pen.

At another point, she worked herself up nearly to the fury of tears when I asked her to consider the fact that not all American women are like the women she knows, who, she said, did not exhibit the attitudes and behavior I was describing as problems. She said as her agitation grew, "I don't know why you assume that I don't know that! I'm really offended that you assume I don't know that!"

The photographer (was his name Ken Lamb?) arrived just then; she calmed down and her tone changed dramatically for the rest of the interview, for all of which he was present.

She said she objected to the fact that my book only talked about men's problems and didn't acknowledge women's experience. I took a copy of the book and showed her the section of the introduction that says, "This book's purpose is not to be in and of itself a balanced discussion of sexism; its purpose is to redress a much larger, 'societal,' imbalance on that terribly complex subject. Few of this book's 78,000 words are devoted to restating the very real problems of sexism against women, about which millions upon millions of words have been written. No one connected to this book denies or has forgotten the existence of sexism against women. We are attempting only to understand and demonstrate that sexism is a reciprocating engine." This seemed to have no effect on her.

A few minutes later, she objected to what she said was the book's assertion that anyone who didn't agree with it was wrong. At first I couldn't imagine where she got such an idea, but then I realized she was distorting the first sentence in the paragraph to which I had previously referred her. "If you adhere to feminism as 'the pursuit of more rights for women,' rather than 'the pursuit of equal rights between the sexes,' you will find this an exceedingly difficult book to stay with. I ask you please to resist saying, 'Yes, but what about [a problem women face],' and to devote your attention at least momentarily to the problems men endure." She agreed that there might be a philosophical difference between more rights for women and equal rights for women, but she disagreed that there was any difference in reality. At that point, I was resigned to the fact that her mind was closed. The interview ended shortly thereafter.

She said that the story about *Good Will Toward Men* would appear in about ten days.

I understand the myth of journalistic objectivity; I am a seasoned veteran of print shock; I know that allowing oneself to be interviewed inevitably results in misquotes and misunderstandings. Nonetheless, I am deeply worried about Jean Marbella's hatchet.

I spoke on March 4 with Isaac Rehert, a retired veteran of the *Sun* features department, about my concerns. He suggested that there was nothing I could or should do, that alerting Marbella's editor could only make matters worse.

Added April 4, 1994

I called Jean Marbella and asked if anything was happening with the story. "Oh," she said, "Susan Hipsley [the lifestyle editor] has lost interest in it. Don't take it personally; these things happen."

Added Early 1995

That is how the *Baltimore Sun*, a paper that writes frequently about sexual politics and gender issues from the orthodox feminist perspective, decided not to publish a single word about *Good Will Toward Men* (except in a year-end compilation of books by Maryland authors in 1994).

San Francisco Chronicle

Armin Brott, now best known as Mr. Dad, was commissioned by Patricia Holt, Book Review Editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, to review *Good Will Toward Men*. Here is his account of what happened.

A conversation with Patricia Holt, editor of the Book Review section of the San Francisco Chronicle re: my review of *Good Will Toward Men* (modemed to them on 3/21/94).

Pat started off saying that she found the book and the review “difficult.” When I asked what she meant, she replied that what the review really needed was “critical analysis.”

Pat said that the statements by the women interviewed appeared to have been taken out of context. She referred to the quote I used by Helen Fisher on the need to educate women on how not to smile, how not to touch. Pat, who says she’s interviewed Helen Fisher, says there is a context for these remarks and that Kammer seems to have taken things out of context. I responded that it is clearly indicated in the book that the interviewees were given the opportunity to see and edit the interview transcripts, but that few changes were actually made. Pat then said that that doesn’t really mean anything, and cited that fact that Toni Morrison approved an abridged version of one of her books which she reads on tape. According to Pat, the book-on-tape is “terrible.”

We then talked a little more about what Pat viewed as a “lack of balance.” She felt that both the book (which she admitted not having read) and the review were “completely one sided” and that it was clear that Mr. Kammer has an agenda. I tried to engage her in a theoretical discussion about whether in fact, one really needs to have balance on every issue. As an example, I mentioned that I thought that Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* was not particularly balanced in the way it presented men. Pat’s response was essentially that since Faludi is chronicling imbalance, she doesn’t actually have to be balanced herself. Hmmm.

She did, however, seem pretty happy when I told her that there were some parts of the book I didn’t like (e.g. the navy reserve officer who seemed to indicate that women should just smile in the face of Tailhook-like treatment.)

The conversation escalated a little as we talked about how Pat felt that comments, such as those made by ArLynn Leiber Presser about how society has no real reaction to the way fathers are shoved away. Pat’s reaction to that was to say that comments like those are deliberately inflammatory and not at all true. She cited the recent movie, “Mrs. Doubtfire” as an example of how we are pretty sympathetic of the plight of men who would do anything to spend more time with their children. I mentioned to her that there is a bill, nicknamed the “Mrs. Doubtfire bill,” currently pending in the California legislature. The bill seeks only to establish the rebuttable presumption that the non-custodial parent (usually the father) should be the first one called whenever a baby-sitter is needed. I told her about the huge protest against this bill by women’s groups.

At some point (I can't remember exactly when), Pat began almost yelling at me, and said "the thing that I really hate about this review and this book is that it's so one-sided. You use the author's words to advance his agenda." We spoke briefly about Suzanne Steinmetz and the bomb threats she received. Pat wasn't impressed, and said that "people get bomb threats for sneezing the wrong way."

Overall, Pat felt that the book simply blames women and is trying to pit the sexes against each other. I disagreed, saying that I felt the book was trying to get both sexes to take a giant step back from each other and to acknowledge that men, too, have some problems. I also said I felt that having women talk about men's problems was an interesting and effective approach, because men lack credibility on gender issues. Pat's response was that the women interviewed in the book sound "nuts." She closed our discussion by offering me a kill fee ("I see you really put some time and energy into this piece"), and by saying that I seemed like such a reasonable guy and that she hopes to be sending me some more books to review.

Note: Armin reports that the editor never paid the kill fee and has assigned him no more work.

St. Martin's Press, the publisher

First I wish to acknowledge the hard work, good will and professionalism of Joan Higgins, Senior Publicist at St. Martin's Press at the time *Good Will Toward Men* was published. She got me onto the Today Show on publication day, February 14, 1994. After that, other players at St. Martin's Press were not as dedicated to the best principles of a free press:

- David Givens, manager of the flagship Barnes & Noble college bookstore at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, was most impressed by the book's balance and even-handedness. He enthusiastically offered to assist in introducing the book to all of Barnes & Noble's college outlets, and even provided a sample letter, yet St. Martin's made no effort whatsoever to develop this prime opportunity. [I added the detail about the sample letter in April 2021 after coming across my July 25, 1995 letter to St. Martin's Press Associate Editor Ensley Eikenburg, in which I referenced it.]
- Several dozen books and the press packs I personalized to accompany them were mysteriously never delivered to the media contacts I had developed.
- Lori Rick, an Assistant Publicist at St. Martin's Press, told me the book was "reactionary," even though admitting she had not read it.
- A writer for the Gannett News Service reported that during a phone call to the St. Martin's Press publicity department he was told by a staffer he identified as "Laurie" that *Good Will Toward Men* was "just a bunch of women sitting around talking." It is unclear whether he misheard "Lori" as "Laurie."
- A roundtable at which I was to discuss the book with St. Martin's Press sales people and other staffers was abruptly cancelled. Oddly, there was subsequently a fallacious report in a New York magazine about what supposedly transpired at the roundtable.
- Judith Sherven, one of the women interviewed in *Good Will Toward Men*, reported, after trying unsuccessfully to bulk order copies of the book for sale to her clients, "I am totally frustrated by St. Martin's Press."