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**Op-Ed Columnist**

## **In Defense of the 'Balloon Boy' Dad**

By **FRANK RICH**

FOR a country desperate for good news, the now-deflated “balloon boy” spectacle would seem to be the perfect tonic. As Wolf Blitzer of CNN summed up the nation’s unrestrained joy upon learning that the imperiled boy had never been in any peril whatsoever: “All of us are so excited that little Falcon is fine.”

Then came even better news. After little Falcon [revealed to Blitzer](#) that his family “did this for the show,” we could all luxuriate in a warm bath of moral superiority. No matter what our own faults as parents, we could never top Richard Heene, who mercilessly exploited his child for fame and profit. Nor could we ever be as craven as the news media, especially cable television, which [dumped a live broadcast](#) of President Obama in New Orleans to track the supersized Jiffy Pop bag floating over Colorado.

Or such are the received lessons of this tale.

Certainly the “balloon boy” incident is a reflection of our time — much as the radio-induced “War of the Worlds” panic dramatized America’s jitters on the eve of World War II, or the national preoccupation with the now-forgotten Congressman Gary Condit signaled America’s pre-9/11 drift into escapism and complacency in the summer of 2001. But to see what “balloon boy” says about 2009, you have to look past the sentimental moral absolutes. You have to

muster some sympathy for the devil of the piece, the Bad Dad. And you can't grant blanket absolution to those in the American audience who smugly blame Heene and television exclusively for the entire embarrassing episode.

It would be lovely, for instance, to believe that cable audiences [doubled in size that afternoon](#) because they were rooting for little Falcon's welfare. But as Seth Meyers and Amy Poehler would say on Weekend Update at "Saturday Night Live," "Really?!?" Many of those viewers were driven by the same bloodlust that spawns rubberneckers at every highway accident: the hope of witnessing the graphic remains of a crash, not a soft landing.

It would also be nice to think that the "balloon boy" viewers were the innocent victims of a dazzling Houdini-class feat of wizardry — a "massive fraud," as Bill O'Reilly thundered. But even slightly jaundiced onlookers might have questioned how a balloon could waft buoyantly through the skies for hours with a 6-year-old boy hidden within its contours. That so few did is an indication of how practiced we are at suspending disbelief when watching anything labeled news, whether the subject is W.M.D.'s in Iraq or celebrity gossip in Hollywood.

"They put on a very good show for us, and we bought it," the local sheriff, Jim Alderden, [said last weekend](#), when he alleged that "balloon boy" was a hoax. His words could stand as the epitaph for an era.

In this case, the show wasn't even that good. But, as usual, the news media nursed it along, enlisting as sales reps for the smoke and mirrors. While the incident unfolded, most TV anchors hyped rather than questioned the aeronautical viability of a vehicle resembling the flying saucers in Ed Wood's camp 1950s sci-fi potboiler, "Plan 9 From Outer Space." But no sooner had the balloon been punctured than the press was caught in another flimflam. Reuters

and CNBC delivered the bombshell that the United States Chamber of Commerce had abruptly reversed its intransigent opposition to climate-change legislation. The “spokesperson” source turned out to be the invention of liberal activists who had [attempted to stage a prank press conference](#) at Washington’s National Press Club.

Next to the other hoaxes and fantasies that have been abetted by the news media in recent years, both the “balloon boy” and Chamber of Commerce ruses are benign. The Colorado balloon may have led to the rerouting of flights and the wasteful deployment of law enforcement resources. But at least it didn’t lead the country into fiasco the way George W. Bush’s flyboy spectacle on an aircraft carrier helped beguile most of the Beltway press and too much of the public into believing that the mission had been accomplished in Iraq. The Chamber of Commerce stunt was a blip of a business news hoax next to the constant parade of carnival barkers who flogged empty stocks on cable during the speculative Wall Street orgies of the dot-com and housing booms.

As “balloon boy” played out, the White House opened fire on one purveyor of fictional news, Fox News, where “tea party” protests are inflated into a national rebellion rivaling the Civil War and where Glenn Beck routinely claims Obama is [perpetrating a conspiracy to bring fascism to America](#). But the White House’s argument is diluted by the different, if less malevolently partisan, fictions that turn up on Fox’s competitors. On CNN, for instance, Lou Dobbs [provided a platform for the nuts](#) questioning Obama’s citizenship. When an ABC News correspondent insisted that Fox was “one of our sister organizations” in [an exchange with the president’s press secretary](#), Robert Gibbs, last week, he wasn’t joking.

Richard Heene is the inevitable product of this reigning culture, where “news,” “reality” television and reality itself are hopelessly scrambled and the warp-speed imperatives of cable-

Internet competition allow no time for fact checking. Norman Lear, about the only prominent American to express any empathy for little Falcon's father, vented on The Huffington Post, calling out CNN, MSNBC, Fox, NBC, ABC and CBS alike for their role in "creating a climate that mistakes entertainment for news." This climate, [he argued](#), "all but seduces a Richard and Mayumi Heene into believing they are — even if what they dream up to qualify is a hoax — entitled to their 15 minutes."

None of this absolves Heene of blame for the damage he may have inflicted on the children he grotesquely used as a supporting cast in his schemes. But stupid he's not. He knew how easy it would be to float "balloon boy" when the demarcation between truth and fiction has been obliterated.

There's also some poignancy in his determination to grab what he and many others see as among the last accessible scraps of the American dream. As [a freelance construction worker and handyman](#), he couldn't find much employment in an economy where construction is frozen and homeowners are more worried about losing their homes than fixing them. Once his appetite had been whetted by two histrionic appearances on "Wife Swap," an ABC reality program, it's easy to see why Heene would turn his life and that of his family into a nonstop audition for more turns in the big tent of the reality media circus.

That circus is among the country's last dependable job engines. More than a quarter of prime-time broadcast television is devoted to reality programs. And so, with [only a high-school education](#), Heene tried to reinvent himself as a cable-ready tornado-chasing scientist. Robert Thomas, a Web entrepreneur who collaborated with Heene on a pitch to ABC for a science-based reality show, saw the "balloon boy" stunt as a sad response to his economic plight. "I think in this case the desperation was too much for Richard to bear," Thomas said in [an](#)

[interview with Gawker.com](#). (It's no less desperate a sign of the times that Thomas insisted on being paid for his interview.)

Heene is a direct descendant of those Americans of the Great Depression who fantasized, usually in vain, that they might find financial salvation if only they could grab a spotlight in show business. Some aspired to the "American Idol" of the day — "Major Bowes Amateur Hour," a hugely popular weekly talent contest on network radio. Others traveled the seedy dance marathon circuit, entering 24/7 endurance contests that promised food and prize money in exchange for freak-show degradation and physical punishment. Horace McCoy's 1935 novel memorializing this Depression milieu was aptly titled "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?"

In 1939, the year that John Steinbeck published "The Grapes of Wrath," his Depression classic about dispossessed Dust Bowl sharecroppers migrating to California's Salinas Valley in search of work, Nathanael West published "The Day of the Locust," about those equally destitute Americans who traveled to Hollywood hoping to land in the movies. "They have been cheated and betrayed," West wrote. "They have slaved and saved for nothing." He could have been describing Americans who lost their jobs, homes and 401(k)'s in our own Great Recession.

The role models for today's desperate fame seekers are "Jon & Kate Plus 8," not Gable and Lombard. But even if they catch a break, as Heene did on "Wife Swap," they still may end up betrayed by a stacked system. As [The Times reported in August](#), many reality shows are as cruel as the old dance marathons. The usual Hollywood workplace rules allowing breaks for rest or meals often don't apply. Nor, sometimes, does the minimum wage. Let 'em eat fame.

If Heene's balloon was empty, so were the toxic financial instruments, inflated by the thin air of unsupported debt, that cratered the economy he inhabits. The press hyped both scams, and the public eagerly bought both. But between the bogus balloon and the banks' bubble, there's no

contest as to which did the most damage to the country. The ultimate joke is that Heene, unlike the reckless gamblers at the top of Citigroup and A.I.G., may be the one with a serious shot at ending up behind bars.

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