

The 1999 Pulitzers--prizes for Ken Starr's allies

Martin McLaughlin
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The awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes for journalism is an incestuous process in which the owners of the biggest newspaper monopolies pay tribute to each other and reward their underlings among the editors, columnists and reporters. But even by the dismal standards of the American press, the 1999 awards were scandalous, especially the two prizes given to representatives of the *New York Times*: Maureen Dowd, for distinguished commentary, and Jeff Gerth, for national reporting.

The Pulitzers are given out in a two-stage process. Juries of a half dozen editors or specialists in particular fields choose three finalists in each category. Then the larger Pulitzer board, consisting mainly of executives, chooses the winners.

There is barely a pretense of impartiality. The *Wall Street Journal*'s foreign editor was in the jury which selected the *Journal* as a finalist for international reporting. The executive photo editor of the Associated Press served on juries which selected the AP as a finalist for both spot news and feature photography. William Safire, long-time conservative columnist for the *New York Times*, is a member of the Pulitzer board which voted awards to his colleagues Dowd and Gerth.

The awards to the two *Times* writers had a definite political significance. They are an attempt by the media establishment to validate retroactively the hysterical campaign waged against the Clinton White House, in collaboration with Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, the congressional Republican leadership, and the extreme right-wing elements who financed and directed the Paula Jones lawsuit.

Jeff Gerth won the award for national reporting on the alleged transfer of American satellite technology to the Chinese military through contracts approved by the Clinton administration. He is the *Times* reporter who,

early in the 1992 election campaign, penned the first story on Clinton's involvement in the failed Whitewater real estate development. This story was to be the starting point for the 1993 media frenzy which led to the appointment of a special prosecutor, the protracted Starr investigation and, ultimately, Clinton's impeachment trial.

Gerth's reporting on Whitewater has been exposed as shoddy and tendentious in numerous publications and in a useful book, *How the Media Invented Whitewater*, by long-time Little Rock columnist Gene Lyons. It was revealed only a few weeks ago that Gerth's Whitewater "reporting" amounted to taking handouts from Clinton's right-wing enemies in Arkansas. James McDougal, Clinton's former partner in Whitewater and Gerth's principal source for the story, received a five-figure sum from Sheffield Nelson, Clinton's Republican opponent in the 1990 gubernatorial race, to speak to the *Times* reporter.

Gerth's reporting last year on Chinese technology acquisition was part of an abortive attempt by the media and congressional Republicans to attach accusations of "selling secrets to China" to the overall Whitewater/Lewinsky charges against the White House. Last month Gerth published a highly dubious front-page report in the *Times* about alleged Chinese espionage at Los Alamos National Laboratory, the latest effort to resuscitate the anti-Clinton campaign.

Columnist Maureen Dowd is the personification of the subjectivism that characterized the editorials, commentaries and news coverage of the *Times* throughout the Monica Lewinsky affair. Many of her columns amounted to little more than name-calling. Take, for example, one from last summer, devoted to disparaging the character and personal appearance of Monica Lewinsky, who was the target of the following

epithets, all in the space of 800 words: "like a little girl," "pudgy," "a mallrat," "a plaything." Truly prize-winning stuff.

In a column last fall Dowd reported she had accidentally encountered Lewinsky at an airport. When Lewinsky asked her, quite understandably, why her columns were so hateful and personally vicious, Dowd was unable to respond. Yet according to the full-page celebratory ad published by the *Times* on Tuesday, "nobody got to the heart of the story more quickly and more consistently than she did."

In reality Dowd never displayed the slightest understanding of the objective political significance of the attempt to overturn the results of two presidential elections by a quasi-constitutional coup, utilizing the Starr investigation. Fixated on Clinton's sex life, she functioned as an ally of Starr and the right wing for nearly a year.

Then late in 1998, after the House Judiciary Committee had voted to move ahead with impeachment proceedings, Dowd began to back away from the anti-Clinton campaign. The *Times* ad covers up this process with the following verbiage:

"Unlike many political columnists, she [Dowd] played no favorites and promoted no ideology in her columns. She wrote about the year's biggest story with radical independence, keeping her nerve and footing while avoiding propaganda and partisanship."

A more truthful, but less flowery, description would be: after eight months of serving as the dupe and mouthpiece, witting or unwitting, of Starr, Gingrich, Henry Hyde, Richard Mellon Scaife and other right-wing elements, including outright fascists and anti-Semites, Dowd jumped ship when it became clear that public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to impeachment.



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