

New York Times' venom over release of Yugoslavia POWs

Martin McLaughlin
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Last week we noted on the *World Socialist Web Site* that official Washington had reacted with thinly disguised hostility to the release of three American soldiers who were captured by Yugoslav Army troops along the Serbia-Macedonia border and held prisoner for more than a month. This response by Clinton administration spokesmen and right-wing media pundits like George Will and William Kristol was in sharp contrast to the usual posture of sympathy and concern for American POWs.

There was further disapproval expressed after one of the soldiers confirmed, in an interview with ABC News, what Yugoslavia officials have maintained all along--that the three were captured when they lost their way along the unmarked border and entered a Serb village inside Yugoslavia. The Pentagon issued a sharply worded statement reiterating its unsupported assertion that the three were captured inside Macedonia. (Significantly, there has been no release of Yugoslav prisoners held by the American military, as a *quid pro quo*.)

Now comes *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, in a column written in the most venomous language, putting on display a truly cold-blooded cynicism about the soldiers which the US government employs as instruments of its foreign policy. Friedman writes Tuesday:

"Is everybody done now?"

"Jesse Jackson, are you done making a fool of yourself, praying together with the demented Serbian leader and mucking up American policy by flying into Belgrade to get out three U.S. P.O.W.'s--as if they should be our top priority now? Network and cable television, have you shown us enough footage of the U.S. P.O.W.'s, telling us about each scratch they got and how they spent their days? Will you also keep us

posted when they sign their book contracts and announce their Web sites?"

What so enrages the *Times* foreign policy columnist? Friedman clearly believes that far too much was made of the three soldiers, and that public concern over the lives of soldiers is an undesirable mood. To encourage this, he lectures Jackson, represents unwarranted interference with American foreign policy. In other words, the American people have got to get used to casualties--soldiers dead, wounded or missing, by the dozens, hundreds or even thousands.

A population which is so concerned with "each scratch," Friedman fears, is not prepared for the kind of bloodletting which a major imperialist war will require. As the *Detroit News* worried, in an editorial the same day: "the amount of attention focused on three soldiers sends another powerful message of just how small the American appetite is for serious military action in the Balkans."

A feigned sympathy for American prisoners of war has long been one of the staples of official and media propaganda in the United States. The phony campaign over nonexistent POWs was used to enforce American economic sanctions against Vietnam for more than two decades. Friedman's column vents the true feelings of the ruling elite towards those unfortunate enough to become cannon fodder for American imperialism.



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