

The media and Mr. Bush

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In its efforts to portray George W. Bush in the most flattering possible light, the liberal press in the US has jettisoned whatever shreds of decorum and journalistic integrity it previously retained. In the course of the past month, testimonials to Bush's astounding metamorphosis from mediocrity to greatness have become almost commonplace in the pages of such journals as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

This exercise in deception and self-delusion assumed grotesque proportions last week when Bush held a nationally televised, prime-time press conference. Bush's meandering performance reflected what he is: a severely limited man, ill-equipped intellectually and politically to grasp the complexities of the situation that has unfolded since the terror attacks on New York and Washington.

The following day the *New York Times* published a rapturous editorial headlined "Mr. Bush's New Gravitas." Marveling at the supposed transformation of the man "who was barely elected president last year," the *Times* declared: "He seemed confident, determined, sure of his purpose and in full command of the complex array of political and military challenges that he faces in the wake of the terrible terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. It was a reassuring performance that should give comfort to an uneasy nation."

The opening accolade set the tone for the rest of the commentary, which concluded on the following note: "In all, it was a commanding appearance that should give citizens a sense that their president has done much to master the complexities of this new global crisis.... [Bush] seemed to be a president whom the nation could follow in these difficult times."

This was an astonishing appraisal. The George W. Bush it described bore virtually no resemblance to the man who gave a White House press conference on October 11. That man tried to string together bits and pieces of ideas that he obviously did not comprehend, resulting in a jumble of non sequiturs, banalities and evasions. Were the *Times* editorialists watching the same press conference?

The members of the White House press corps did their best to give the president a free ride, refraining from asking any questions that challenged the dishonest claims that are being used to justify a war in Afghanistan and an assault on civil liberties within the US.

No one asked Bush to explain how a group of terrorists could implement a plan to murder thousands, destroy the World Trade Center and bomb the Pentagon, without being detected or deterred. No reporter noted the White House's failure to this day to provide concrete evidence of Osama bin Laden's guilt. In its collective cowardice, the press corps refused even to question Bush's efforts to muzzle the press.

Of the economic and strategic aims underlying the war in petroleum-rich Central Asia, there was not a hint. The three-letter word beginning in "o" and ending in "l" was never uttered.

Nevertheless, Bush proved incapable of making a coherent case for

the government's course of action. Far from appearing "confident, determined and sure of his purpose," Bush was tentative, rambling and vague. As for his "command of the complex array of political and military challenges," the president could not even repeat with any consistency the mantras that had been formulated by his advisers.

What he initially termed "the first, and we hope, the only [war] of the twenty-first century" became, the second time around, "the first battle in the war of the twenty-first century," and, a few minutes later, "the new wars of the twenty-first century."

As for the nature of the war, its duration and aims, Bush could offer little insight beyond the assertion that it was "a different kind of war," a phrase he repeated several times. Again and again Bush grabbed for such catchphrases. There was much talk about "smoking him out of his cave" and references to bin Laden as "the evil-doer."

Bush's remarks contained glaring contradictions. One reporter, noting that US officials could not say for sure whether bin Laden was still in Afghanistan, asked whether the war on terrorism could be won if the prime target was not found. Bush replied that "success or failure depends not on bin Laden." He continued, "[S]uccess or failure depends upon routing [sic] out terrorism where it may exist all around the world. He's just one person, a part of a network."

How terrorism can be "routed out" all over the world without capturing or eliminating the man whom the US claims is the world's preeminent terrorist was not explained. Having downplayed the significance of bin Laden in one breath, moreover, Bush credited him with possessing vast powers in the next, declaring that the Saudi exile had "hijacked a country" and "forced a country to accept his radical thoughts."

Another reporter pointed to that day's FBI warning of fresh terrorist attacks and asked the entirely legitimate question: "Given the complete generality of that warning, what does it really accomplish, aside from scaring people into not doing what you've urged them to do—getting back to their normal lives...?" Bush was plainly at a loss to unravel this conundrum.

It was "a general threat on America," he said, adding, "had it been a specific threat, we would have contacted those to whom the threat was directed." He went on to say the American people "should take comfort" from official warnings of imminent attacks, because they showed the government was "on full alert." He then cited "positive news" of an increase in commercial aircraft load factors and a rise in hotel occupancy rates. "We are getting back to normal," Bush declared.

This was a typical Bush non sequitur. He wanted to counter suspicions that the FBI alert was a ploy to create panic and stampede the public behind his war policy and his attacks on democratic rights. So he insisted that the threat of an imminent attack was real. But from this dire premise he somehow concluded that the appropriate response of the American people was to "get back to normal."

People should also be vigilant, he declared. But when asked, twice, exactly what this vigilance entailed and how ordinary people could protect themselves, Bush was at a loss. “The American people, obviously, if they see something that is suspicious, something out of the norm that looks suspicious, they ought to notify local law authorities,” he said.

In response to the final question of the news conference—“What are Americans supposed to look for and report to the police or to the FBI?”—Bush could do no better than: “If you see suspicious people lurking around petrochemical plants, report it to law enforcement.”

Here is how the *Times* described the president’s attempt to handle these questions: “Mr. Bush was especially effective in talking to the American people about their fears. He spoke candidly about new warnings that additional terrorist attacks could come at any time, but described the many precautions that the government is taking to defend the home front. He was at once firm in his resolve to protect the nation and fatherly in his calm advice to get on with the life of the country as much as people can.”

In this mixture of boot-licking and deceit, one claim stands out because it calls into question whether the authors even watched the press conference. It is factually untrue that Bush “described the many precautions that the government is taking to defend the home front.” He did no such thing.

The *Times* continued: “Using a mixture of straight talk, statesmanship and a touch of humor here and there, Mr. Bush used the press conference to clarify and sharpen his positions on several core issues in the war against terrorism.” The “clarifying” and “sharpening” which the newspaper lauded consisted of refusing to place a time limit on the war and allusions to setting up a client regime in Afghanistan, with the United Nations being called on to provide a legal fig leaf. The *Times* also praised Bush for threatening Iraq without committing the US to an imminent attack on Baghdad—“a step that the nation is not *yet* [emphasis added] prepared to take,” in the words of the editorial.

The *Times* was particularly pleased with Bush’s talk of humanitarian aid to the “impoverished people of Afghanistan.” It described as “heartfelt” Bush’s most sickening display of hypocrisy—his appeal for American children to send donations to the children of Afghanistan.

In this connection, the *Times* passed over in silence a highly damning admission. Bush made a passing reference to Washington’s “previous engagement in the Afghan area,” and said his administration had learned from that experience that “we should not just simply leave after a military objective has been achieved.”

Bush was referring to US support for the Islamic Mujahedin during the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. As is well known, the guerillas armed and financed by the CIA in that period included Osama bin Laden and the precursors of the Taliban. No government played a greater role than the US in fostering the growth of these reactionary forces in Afghanistan, and once the Soviet army withdrew, Washington pulled out and left the population at the mercy of rival warlords and Islamic fundamentalist militias. The result was years of civil war that virtually destroyed the country.

Thus, by the time Bush concluded his remarks with a play at compassion, describing the horrific conditions facing Afghanistan’s children, he had already pointed unwittingly to the culpability of the US for these very conditions.

There were other remarkable statements that the *Times* chose to overlook, such as Bush’s assertion that the major mistake in Vietnam

was allowing elected officials to control the actions of the military, his inane pronouncement that the lesson to be drawn from the events of September 11 was that “there is evil in the world,” and his profession of “amazement” at the widespread hatred for the US in the Arab and Muslim world.

What accounts for this simultaneous display of ignorance and dishonesty? Bush is a man who has not read a serious book in the last twenty years, if not in his entire life. He knows almost nothing about history, and even less about Central Asia. He is making war in a part of the world about which he is uninformed. It is doubtful that prior to September 11 he could have named the countries bordering Afghanistan.

He lacks a command of facts, let alone the ability to form broad generalizations that are rooted in facts and history, without which serious politics is impossible. He is abysmally unqualified for his position. All of this is well known in ruling class political and media circles.

The *Times’* editors know that Bush’s press conference bore no resemblance to their adulatory review. Why, then, did they publish such a shameless tract?

The media is determined that there will be no repetition of the Vietnam-era “credibility gap” because there will be no challenge from their quarter to the claims of the government. This open transformation of the press into a propaganda arm of the state is a symptom of the far-reaching degeneration of democratic institutions in America.

Articles and commentaries such as that of the *New York Times*, and they are legion, reflect the contempt of the American ruling elite for the public. The media is not engaged simply in influencing public opinion. American politics has reached the stage where public opinion itself is entirely synthetic.

Lies and half-truths have become the ingredients of a perfected system of manipulation that is only remotely connected to facts and has virtually no reference to the concerns and moods of the broad mass of the population. Public opinion is nothing more than the manner in which the corporate oligarchy and its government agents package their own outlook.

The entire media operation has become an exercise not only in mass deception, but also in self-delusion. It is a closed circle that reflects the extreme alienation of the political system from the general population.

Notwithstanding the polls showing overwhelming support for the war, the more profound mood of the American people is one of unease and fear that the conflict will spiral out of control. It is inevitable that the staggering levels of social inequality and political alienation that characterize American society will find expression in enormous upheavals, for which an insulated ruling elite and its media propagandists are ill prepared.



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