

US government steps up press censorship

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19 October 2001

The Bush administration and the Pentagon are stepping up efforts to block the American public and the world from learning the extent of destruction the US military is exacting on the Afghan population.

According to a report in the British *Guardian* newspaper, the US Defense Department has spent millions of dollars to prevent western media from seeing highly accurate photographs, taken by privately owned satellites, which show the effects of the bombing.

The images were taken from Ikonos, an advanced satellite owned by the Denver-based company Space Imaging. Among the photos the commercial satellite had already taken was a line of alleged terrorists marching between training camps in Jalalabad. The same scene, taken after the bombing campaign began, would have revealed numerous bodies lying on the ground, the newspaper reported.

Rather than leaving the images available to the media, the US military bought exclusive rights to all Ikonos images of Afghanistan in an agreement retroactive to the start of the bombing campaign. According to the *Guardian*, the decision to shut down access to satellite images was taken October 11, after reports of heavy civilian casualties from the overnight strikes on training camps near Darunta, northwest of Jalalabad.

Under US law, the Pentagon has legal power to exercise “shutter control” over civilian satellites launched from the US in order to prevent use of the images by a potential military foe. Since the images of the bombed Afghan bases would not have shown the position of US forces or compromised military security, an attempt to use such claims could have been challenged as unconstitutional, critics have commented.

“If they has imposed shutter control, it is entirely possible that news organizations would have filed a lawsuit against the government arguing prior restraint

censorship,” said Dr. John Pike of Globalsecurity, a web site that publishes satellite images of military and alleged terrorist facilities around the world.

The US has no military need for the pictures because it already has seven satellites in orbit. Four of these, called Keyholes, take photographic images estimated to be six to ten times better than those produced by Ikonos.

Daily bombing raids have caused widespread destruction and casualties in Afghanistan, little of which has been reported by Pentagon press briefings. In addition to the civilian loss of life, the massive bombing has undoubtedly claimed the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of Taliban soldiers, who include conscripts, some of which are reportedly as young as 12 years old. During the Persian Gulf War the Pentagon made a principle of not making public the number of Iraqi civilians and soldiers killed by US armed forces. The control of information is even tighter now.

The banning of satellite images is only the latest of recent efforts by the Bush administration to censor reporting on the war. This week the international journalists organization Reporters sans Frontières (Reporters without Borders) detailed the Bush administration’s efforts to muzzle al-Jazeera, the Arabic television channel based in Qatar, which is one of the few news organization reporting from Afghanistan.

Before US bombing began, Secretary of State Colin Powell attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Emir of Qatar, the main shareholder in the station, to bring the station to heel because, Powell claimed, it was encouraging anti-American sentiment. After al-Jazeera’s broadcast of a message from Osama bin Laden as US bombing was inaugurated, US denunciations of the station intensified. This theme was taken up by right-wing spokespersons in the US media

who denounced the station for being an Arab propaganda machine, which the US should add to its list of military targets.

“The United States is joining the many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, who have little respect for freedom of the press, in their criticism of this channel,” said Robert Menard, general secretary of Reporters without Borders. Menard called on Powell to cease US pressure on the station, saying that “informational pluralism must be respected in all circumstances.”

Menard also denounced the White House’s efforts to pressure US television networks to stop broadcasting unedited remarks from bin Laden or representatives of Al Qaeda. After the networks agreed to these demands the White House made similar efforts to stop the print media from publishing transcripts of bin Laden’s remarks.

Veronica Forwood, chairwoman of the British branch of Reporters without Borders, denounced the US government’s suppression of the freedom of the press, noting “wartime censorship is still censorship.” She also criticized the US media, saying, “In a bizarre and unprecedented move, the five major networks—CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox News Channel—have rolled over and acquiesced to the call for censorship from the US president’s security adviser Condoleeza Rice.”

In a report on the role of the US news media since the September 11 events, Reporters without Borders concluded, “The symbiosis which appears to operate between the tone of the main audio-visual industry and official US policy could eventually militate against the watchdog role of the media in a democracy.”

The extent of the government secrecy and press censorship has reached such levels, however, that it has even provoked mild protests from within US media circles. A statement released during last weekend’s Associated Press Managing Editors conference said while the need for “unusual measures” in time of war was understood, government restrictions on the press “pose dangers to American democracy.”

In another highly significant move, Attorney General John Ashcroft this week directed government agencies to restrict the distribution of government records to journalists and others requested under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Reporters and private citizens have long used the act to obtain unclassified government records, which officials otherwise would

not release.

In a memo issued Wednesday, Ashcroft instructed agencies to “carefully consider” such requests and said they would have the backing of the Justice Department if they denied access to information. To justify his order Ashcroft, who has released virtually no information about the hundreds of immigrants detained since September 11, cited the need to protect national security, as well as business information.



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