

Washington Post justifies jingoism on Iraq

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In an extraordinary editorial published in its February 27 edition, the *Washington Post* provided further evidence of the chasm that separates the US political establishment and the broad layers of the American people on the impending war against Iraq.

Entitled “‘Drumbeat on Iraq? A Response to Readers,” the editorial acknowledged that the *Post*’s relentless advocacy of an invasion of Iraq has provoked a “torrent of letters” against war. It described these messages as “angry and anguished.” It quoted one such letter as denouncing the paper’s “endless drumbeating for war in Iraq” and another as saying, “It is truly depressing to witness the depths *Washington Post* editors have reached in their jingoistic rush to war.”

“It is a serious charge, and it deserves a serious response,” the editorial solemnly declared. Unfortunately, the *Post*’s editors offered nothing of the kind. Rather, the paper served up another rehash of the Bush administration’s war policy.

In 1977, the paper’s late publisher Katharine Graham, a fairly conservative Republican, described herself as a “centrist,” who eschewed the “eccentric or extreme.” Quoting Walter Lippmann, Graham, a Republican, declared “a newspaper may be a little to the left of its community, or a little to the right, but it cannot move too far from the center of opinion without alienating its audience and losing readers.”

The intervening quarter of a century has seen the *Post* march steadily to the right, particularly on issues of US foreign policy. It supported the Reagan administration’s financing of the contra mercenaries in Nicaragua, backed the invasions of Grenada and Panama, the bombings of Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the first Persian Gulf War and the intervention in Yugoslavia.

While publishing editorials on a weekly basis promoting war against Iraq, it has assembled a stable of right-wing and neoconservative columnists—Charles Krauthammer, George Will, Michael Kelly, Jim Hoagland—who all enthusiastically embrace US militarism and vilify opponents of war. To round out this spectrum of opinion, the paper regularly throws open its opinion columns to the likes of Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, Robert Dole, George Shultz and other former US officials willing to make the case for military aggression.

The *Post* editorial highlights the paper’s political trajectory, noting that in the aftermath of the last Persian Gulf War in 1991, “we supported—in hindsight too unquestioningly—a cease-fire agreement that left Saddam Hussein in power.”

At the time, this agreement was backed by the decisive sections of the Republican Party around Bush senior and opposed only by what was then considered a fringe of radical right-wingers who

sought a continued march on Baghdad as part of a strategy to shift the balance of power in the Middle East. “In hindsight,” the *Post* suggests that it should have taken the side of the right-wing fringe, which is now in power and directing the strategy of Bush junior in a war of conquest in Iraq. It is this layer with whom the editors find themselves in agreement.

After chiding Clinton for failing to launch a full-scale war against Iraq and Congressional Republicans for dismissing his 1998 missile attack on Baghdad as an attempt to distract public opinion from the impeachment crisis, the editorial goes on to state: “After Sept. 11, 2001, many people of both parties said—and we certainly hoped—that the country had moved beyond such failures of will and politicization of deadly foreign threats. An outlaw dictator, in open defiance of UN resolutions, unquestionably possessing and pursuing biological and chemical weapons, expressing support for the Sept. 11 attacks: Surely the nation would no longer dither in the face of such a menace.”

Nothing could more clearly substantiate the charge of jingoism that the editorial was supposedly written to refute. It is in the tradition of the “yellow journalism” made infamous by American newspapers in the 1890s, particularly those run by William Randolph Hearst. In an attempt to whip up war fever and incite hatred for Spain, these papers deliberately distorted events. Their efforts were aimed at providing false pretexts for war—“liberating” the Cubans or Filipinos, “avenging” the mysterious sinking of the battleship Maine in Havana harbor, or punishing the Spanish colonialists for human rights abuses—while concealing the real aims of the ruling elite to establish US imperialist domination over the Western Hemisphere and substantial sections of the Pacific.

What else is the *Post*, and indeed the rest of the establishment media, doing today? It likewise works to conceal the real war aims. Nowhere in the defense of its position is the word “oil” ever mentioned; nor is there any hint at US strategic interests in the region.

Instead, there is the ritualistic invocation of the terrorist attacks of September 11—the modern-day equivalent of Hearst’s “avenge the Maine.” Knowing full well that Iraq had no involvement whatsoever with these attacks, the *Post* editors try to invent one. Saddam Hussein is guilty of “expressing support for the Sept. 11 attacks.” This is a bold-faced lie. When was this expression of “support” ever reported in the *Washington Post*? The Iraqi regime condemned the attacks from the day that they took place. Hussein voiced the same position in the interview last week with Dan Rather on CBS News.

Next, the *Post* asserts that the nation must unite behind the drive to war because of the Iraqi regime “unquestionably possessing and

pursuing biological and chemical weapons.” Who said the existence of such weapons is unquestionable? Those in charge of the United Nations weapons inspections program have asserted just the opposite: they have seen no evidence—including what has been provided by US intelligence—proving that they do exist. It is worth noting that the *Post* leaves the accusation of nuclear weapons out of its litany of charges, a tacit admission that this allegation has been so thoroughly discredited as not to bear repeating.

Bristling at the accusation that they are warmongers, the *Post*’s editors insist: “we do not take lightly the risks of war—to American and Iraqi soldiers and civilians,” adding a mild criticism that the Bush administration “has only begun to prepare the public” for coming “sacrifices.”

But when has the *Post* warned of the “risks of war,” a rather antiseptic term to describe the certain slaughter that is to come? How many Iraqi deaths are acceptable to the editors? Are they willing to kill a quarter of a million, a probable death toll according to at least one international relief agency? What about the war’s aftermath? After the last Persian Gulf War, more than a million more deaths—most of them children—were attributed to the effects of US destruction of the country’s economy, health system and sanitary infrastructure. Is that an acceptable “risk” as well?

Lacking any evidence of a supposed threat from Iraqi weapons, the editorial slips in a crude bait-and-switch argument: “[T]he world is already a dangerous place. Anthrax has been wielded in Florida, New York and Washington.... Are the United States and its allies ultimately safer if they back down and leave Saddam Hussein secure.”

As the *Post* well knows, the Iraqi regime had nothing to do with the anthrax attacks. Overwhelming evidence exists that the anthrax-laced letters sent to the media and top congressional Democratic leaders came from someone directly linked to the US bio-weapons program and the military intelligence apparatus.

Where is the *Post*’s editorial campaign demanding that those responsible for these terrorist attacks, which claimed the lives of at least five people and left eighteen more infected, be brought to justice? No one can accuse the *Post* of “drumbeating” over the anthrax attacks. Like the rest of the media, it has maintained a discrete silence on these sinister events. They are only mentioned to provide yet another pretext for war on Iraq.

The editorial describes an invasion of Iraq as a “war of choice.” While acknowledging that “there is a long list of terrible things that could go wrong,” the *Post*’s editors insist: “The right question though, is not ‘Is war risky?’ but ‘Is inaction less so?’”

“The ‘right question’ for whom?” it should be asked. Is this approach universally applicable? Is it the “right question” for India and Pakistan should either of them decide that a nuclear first strike would be less risky than inaction? How about the countries facing a future attack from the US itself? Should they also consider a roll of the dice, attacking Washington before US troops land?

Wasn’t this precisely the line of argument that prevailed within ruling circles in Japan in 1941? The Japanese militarists made the case that to attack the US was risky, but inaction in the face of America’s growing military buildup would be even more so. The result was Pearl Harbor, denounced as a criminal “sneak attack”

and an act of “infamy.” Now, this very same militarist logic is embraced by both the Bush administration and the *Post* and codified in the doctrine of “preemptive war.”

It should be recalled that the vanquished leaders of both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were tried as war criminals at the end of the Second World War on the principal charge of planning and launching an aggressive war.

The entire web of international laws and treaties established after World War II, including the creation of the United Nations itself, was founded on a rejection of such “wars of choice,” now defended under the labels of “regime change” and “preemptive war.”

It is clear that behind Washington’s rejection of the jurisdiction of the recently created International Criminal Court lies the guilty knowledge that in Iraq—and soon, no doubt, elsewhere—it is embarking on wars of aggression that are in patent violation of international law.

What Katharine Graham warned against 26 years ago has already come to pass. The *Post* has moved considerably to the right of its readership base, which finds itself alienated from and revolted by the paper’s robotic echoing of the administration’s war propaganda.

Increasingly the newspaper’s editors, like much of the media establishment, speak not to the broad public, but rather to a narrow financial and political elite that is prepared to embrace criminal policies both at home and abroad to defend its privileges and wealth.

The *Post*’s editorial concludes with a sanctimonious dismissal of its readers’ concerns: “We respect our readers who believe that war is the worst option. But we believe, that in this case, long-term peace will be better served by strength than by concessions.”

Concessions to what or whom, the editorial does not say. Concessions, perhaps, to the observance of international laws that make the policy the newspaper advocates a war crime. Or it could be referring to concessions to the sentiments of the vast majority of the world’s people, who oppose the war of aggression advocated by both Bush and the *Post*.



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