

The battlefield deaths of American journalists Michael Kelly and David Bloom: some hard truths

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Two US journalists “embedded” with military units met death in Iraq last week. Michael Kelly, 46, editor-at-large of *Atlantic Monthly* and a columnist for the *Washington Post*, died on April 3 in a vehicle accident. David Bloom, 39, of the NBC television network, died April 6 of a blood clot. Both were traveling with the US Army’s Third Infantry Division. Many superficial tributes have been paid to the pair. It is, however, useful to examine their careers more carefully. What did they represent?

We are admonished by the ancients not to speak ill of the dead, and indeed almost any death instinctively evokes a certain sympathy. On occasion, however, the demands of historical truth outweigh other considerations. A false sentimentality is out of place in the face of the historic crime being carried out by the US military in Iraq and the role of the American mass media as its chief accessory.

Kelly and Bloom embodied two of the types all too well represented in the US media. Kelly was an out-and-out scoundrel and warmonger. Bloom, on the other hand, exhibited the bland, empty quality and false “objectivity” of a man without profound concerns, except perhaps his own advancement.

The same extraordinary phrase appeared in tributes to both Kelly and Bloom, that “they died doing what they loved.” Are those making this comment, which is most likely accurate, even aware of its implications?

It could not possibly have been made about the vast majority of American journalists reporting on the bloody battles of World War II, or even the Vietnam War. What did Kelly and Bloom (and the others still operating) “love” about covering an imperialist slaughter, one in the historic tradition of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia and Hitler’s blitzkrieg against Poland. Was it being on the winning side, feeling invincible, acting like conquerors?

Neither Kelly, Bloom nor any of the other US journalists on hand, with a few exceptions, have provided the slightest insight into the present conflict’s long-term significance, into Iraqi or Middle Eastern political and social reality, or even the lives and thoughts of the US soldiers and marines. The many columns of print and hours of broadcast time, in terms of their contribution to an objective understanding of the present situation, much less an anticipation of future developments, add up to zero.

Why were Kelly and Bloom drawn to this war? Why were they there?

The son of two journalists, Michael Kelly attended the University of New Hampshire before beginning his career on ABC’s “Good Morning America.” He went on to work for a variety of newspapers, including the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Boston Globe* and *New York Times*. Giving some indication of his political leanings, he showed up at the 1987 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, according to the *Washington Post*’s Howard Kurtz, with Fawn Hall, Oliver North’s secretary and participant in the Iran-Contra conspiracy.

Kelly covered the first Persian Gulf War and authored a book about it,

Martyrs’ Day. He wrote for the *New Republic* and the *New Yorker*, becoming the editor of the former in 1996. His obsessive and violent attacks on the Clinton-Gore administration, however, resulted in his firing after only 10 months. In 1999 Kelly was hired as editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*, leaving that position last year to become editor-at-large. He wrote a weekly column in the *Washington Post*.

Over the past few years Kelly made a name for himself by the vitriol of his right-wing commentary. He was a leader of the pack howling for the blood of any individual, organization or nation that opposed American imperial designs. It was Kelly who took on the task of red-baiting the Workers World group for its role in the antiwar movement, following the large demonstration in Washington on January 18, in his notorious column “Marching With Stalinists” (January 22, 2003). [See *Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly red-baits the Workers World Party 24 January 2003].

Any elementary sympathy one feels about Kelly’s death is counteracted by the experience of reading his venomous columns. In general, whenever the opportunity for vileness and cruelty arose, Kelly was there. One of the favorite words of this “respected” columnist for a “respected” newspaper was “kill.”

A few examples:

August 15, 2001: “It [Israel] can win only by fighting the war on its terms, unleashing an overwhelming force ... to destroy, kill, capture and expel the armed Palestinian forces that have declared war on Israel.”

November 7, 2001: “Working men will not march in the army of the flag-burners. They will march in the army that is setting out to kill the people who killed so many of their union brothers in the fire and police departments of New York City.”

From his war dispatches: “The overall view is expressed by [Brig. Gen. Lloyd] Austin: ‘We can see them. And what we can see, we can hit, and what we can hit, we can kill, and the kill will be catastrophic.’ And by Sterling: ‘A thousand things can happen to make life absolutely miserable for us. There is not one thing that can happen to stop us’” (“Warriors at Work,” March 19, 2003).

“The 3rd Infantry and its accompanying forces had, as of Friday night, killed probably more than 1,000 of the enemy and taken more than 560 prisoners. The division’s own casualty list stood at one killed in action, one killed in a vehicle accident and 23 wounded seriously enough to require hospitalization ...

“‘The [Iraqi] trucks would just drive pell-mell down the road at us, 60 miles an hour, until they would get shot, and then any guys that were left would jump out of the trucks and rush at us with RPGs, trying to get in their shots,’ Oliver recalled the day after the battle. ‘They would fire their RPGs at the Bradleys. And we would kill them’” (“Limited War, So Far,” March 30, 2003).

The sort of human specimen who revels in killing, shooting, bombing and destroying, as Kelly obviously did, comes to the fore in a period of social and moral decay. (Should not a specific socio-psychological study be made of the personality type attracted to massive and deadly firepower?) While he ritualistically referred to the task of establishing “democracy” in Iraq, Kelly, like Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, his fellow *Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer and others, engaged in an increasingly cynical *realpolitik*: the essential guideline for American foreign policy ought to be the ruthless crushing of Washington’s enemies and the establishment of absolute US dominance in world affairs.

Kelly’s anger and vindictiveness extended to the Hussein regime in particular. He intended to be present at the “liberation” of Iraq by the US military. A colleague commented, “Mike had more than just a journalistic side. He did have a dog in this fight. He believed a proper effort was underway here and he wanted to chronicle it.”

While occasionally posturing as a friend of the working man, Kelly climbed the social ladder and hobnobbed with the rich and powerful. Maureen Dowd of the *Times*, in a particularly smug and stupid tribute, “The Best Possible Life,” observed that “Michael always seemed to be in the right place at the right time to get the best quote and the best story, the best jobs and the best life.”

Kelly was one of a select group of right-wing journalists who enjoyed (if the word is suitable) a briefing from George W. Bush the night before this year’s State of the Union address. According to Rich Lowry of the *National Review*, also present:

“Kelly asked the question that most fired-up [sic] Bush. He asked whether America would have the resolve to see the Iraq war through if things went wrong, because many people were worried that the country still couldn’t withstand a difficult military action. [In other words, was the administration prepared to stand up to public opinion and use the entire range of its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction to eliminate the Hussein regime and subjugate Iraq?] Bush practically leapt out of his chair saying that he would see this through, no matter what.

“Others tried to interrupt with other questions, but Bush wouldn’t let go, emphasizing to Kelly—‘Michael, let me be clear’—over and over again that he would see this through.”

Ignorant, crude, even psychopathic, Kelly’s columns appealed to the worst elements in American society. Indeed, by his friends shall ye know him. Following Kelly’s death, Bush offered his condolences and Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke told reporters, “Mike was just a phenomenal journalist.” Right-wing fanatic Peggy Noonan of the *Wall Street Journal* asserted, “The death of Michael Kelly is a sin against the order of the world. He was a young man on his way to becoming a great man.”

David Bloom is a somewhat different case. A native of Edina, Minnesota and a graduate of Pitzer College in Claremont, California, started as a news anchorman and correspondent for a television station in Wisconsin. He began working for NBC News as its Chicago correspondent in 1993 and became the network’s White House correspondent in 1997. At the time of his death Bloom was the co-anchor of the weekend edition of the “Today” show.

Following his death, NBC News President Neal Shapiro told the *Post*’s Kurtz, “Early on he [Bloom] said, ‘I want a piece of this war.’” Commented CNN’s Walter Rodgers, “This was going to be his war. He was going to make his mark. He knew he was going to elbow the rest of us out of the way.”

Kurtz, in a piece intended as a tribute, continues: “With his boyish good looks and bubbly personality, the 10-year NBC veteran, who usually began phone calls with ‘Hey, buddy,’ always seemed ticketed for stardom. But those who might have been inclined to view him as a self-promoting pretty boy were won over by his sheer doggedness.” Along the

same lines, Kurtz later feels the need to refute the notion that Bloom was merely a “‘handsome’ lightweight.”

One is reminded of Tom Grunick, the William Hurt character in James L. Brooks’s rather mild slap at the television news industry, *Broadcast News* (1987)—an ambitious “lightweight” who advances at the expense of more substantial colleagues solely because of his good looks and camera presence. At one point Grunick is discovered to have staged a teary reaction shot of himself conducting an interview for a piece on date rape.

Bloom conducted his coverage of the Iraq war in a specially designed armored vehicle, nicknamed the “Bloom-mobile,” which could transmit sharp images traveling at speeds of up to 50 miles per hour. He was seen day and night on NBC, CNBC and MSNBC, often in his goggles, with his hair blowing in the wind. What did he actually convey, however, to his audience? Can a single segment or insight be recalled?

According to the *Associated Press*, “From the Iraqi desert, Bloom reported on what the American forces were doing militarily, but he also took the time to convey what their lives were like there, including the meals they were eating and what it was like trying to work in the middle of a sand storm. ‘He was a rising star here,’ [NBC’s] Shapiro said.”

One must be blunt: Bloom’s death was pointless. He didn’t perish in the cause of enlightening the American people on the essence of the current conflict. He didn’t even convey the reality of the battlefield. He will be remembered primarily for his wind-blown hair and his night-vision goggles.

The American television reporters in Iraq as a group have given no indication that they grasp the political or moral implications of the event they are ostensibly covering. They are not engaged in serious reporting, they simply preside over a parade of more or less meaningless images, provided without social or historical context, somehow intended to bolster the US government’s case. They accept entirely the framework within which this war has been conducted. The brutal deaths of thousands of people, to which in some cases they are eyewitnesses, and the continued destruction of a society have no apparent impact on these people.

Bloom and Kelly, each in his own fashion, were the products of a 25-year process by which the US media, since the end of the Vietnam War, has been conditioned to serve as the mouthpiece of the most right-wing elements in the political establishment and the American military and intelligence apparatus. One significant milestone in that process was the Clinton impeachment drive, through which the same sinister cabal that now controls the White House sought to overturn the result of two national elections. It is noteworthy that Kelly and Bloom share this news beat on their résumé.

Kelly was one of the most ferocious Clinton-bashers, the author of the “first and still definitive Hillary Clinton take-down” (in Noonan’s words), a 1994 *New York Times* Sunday magazine cover story, “Saint Hillary.” During the Lewinsky scandal he wrote: “Bill Clinton and his morally bankrupt defenders intend to do whatever it takes to discredit his impeachment, to savage the reputations of those who supported it and to establish Clinton as a sort of hero, the president who bravely defended the Constitution against a small band of hate-blinded fanatics.”

Bloom, although less polemically, played his own pernicious role. Whether for ideological reasons or merely as a function of his careerism, the NBC White House correspondent jumped on the anti-Clinton bandwagon with zeal. ABC’s Claire Shipman recalls, “You did not want to compete against David because he was tireless. During the Monica Lewinsky story, I’d listen to him wheedle and cajole tidbits out of the lawyers who could not tell him no. He would not take no for an answer.”

Kurtz notes: “At a NATO meeting in Madrid, Bloom charged up to a roped-off area to ask President Clinton about a White House scandal development. ‘Stay on me, I’m going in,’ he told his cameraman. Bloom laughed it off when Clinton got even by skipping him at the next news conference.”

Bloom's role was not a small one. In September 1998 US District Judge Norma Holloway Johnson ordered Kenneth Starr's Office of the Independent Counsel (OIC) to show cause why it should not be held in contempt for grand jury leaks revealed in 24 news reports. Starr and his office were notorious for the illegal practice of disclosing to favored members of the media unsubstantiated items they felt were damning to the Clinton administration. The first two stories based on OIC leaks, dated January 21 and 22, 1998, are credited to none other than NBC's David Bloom.

Endlessly sifting through the minutiae of a sordid sex scandal, it would never have occurred to a Bloom that he was assisting in an attempted political coup d'état organized by right-wing conspirators. Nor would it have dawned on him while driving through the Iraqi desert that the war in which he hoped to "make his mark" had been prepared and launched by the same group of conspirators.

A genuinely new journalism will come into being only as a direct and conscious rejection of everything Kelly, Bloom and their ilk stand for. It will emerge out of a deep revulsion against the US media propaganda machine, which has established a seamless link between the Pentagon and the nation's television screens and front pages. It will ferret out the truth about American aggression in the face of official opposition and repression. It will print and broadcast scathing commentaries on the US military, that hideous coming together of big business, Orwellian bureaucracy and cold-blooded mass murder.

Such a development is overdue.



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