

Manufacturing the news: New York Times report on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

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An article published Monday on the front page of the *New York Times* reports that a former Iraqi scientist who worked in a secret arms program led a US military team to material that proved to be “the building blocks” of banned weapons.

The article, headlined “Illicit Arms Kept Till Eve of War, An Iraqi Scientist Is Said to Assert,” makes the sensationalist assertion that, according to this scientist, “Iraq destroyed chemical weapons and biological warfare equipment only days before the war began.”

This report from the “newspaper of record” was strategically timed. It came amidst a mounting clamor internationally and a rising chorus of questions at home over the failure of American forces to discover a single piece of evidence substantiating the Bush administration’s insistence that the ousted regime of Saddam Hussein was guilty of hoarding large stores of chemical and biological weapons and pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

Since this allegation was the main argument of the US government for invading Iraq, killing thousands of soldiers and civilians and establishing an American protectorate in the oil-rich country, the absence of any evidence to back up Washington’s charges points to an obvious conclusion: the Bush administration lied to the American people and the rest of the world in order to fabricate a pretext for launching its unprovoked war.

No wonder, therefore, that the *Times* article was picked up by all of the American cable news channels on Monday and made the major story of the day. The article was unsourced and unconfirmed. Nonetheless, it became the basis for a raft of other reports on television, radio and in newspapers, claiming that US troops had made a major breakthrough in the search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, citing the *Times* as the source.

The most extraordinary thing about this article is that it presents no facts to confirm either the existence of the weapons, or the “building blocks” of such weapons (whatever that might mean) or the scientist who supposedly uncovered them. All that is offered by *Times* reporter Judith Miller is an unsupported and undocumented assertion by members of the American military unit, Mobile Exploitation Team Alpha.

Miller was deployed with MET Alpha in the Iraqi war zone. While it is not clear from her account whether she was formally embedded, she accompanied the specialized unit on a series of fruitless efforts to examine suspected weapons caches discovered by American ground troops in the course of the conquest of Iraq. No chemical or biological weapons were found at any of these sites.

However, acting on information received by the 101st Airborne Division near Baghdad, MET Alpha claimed to have located an Iraqi scientist and obtained an account of his activities and his purported knowledge of the secret weapons program.

Miller admits that she cannot corroborate any of the assertions of the MET Alpha members, writing in her article:

“Under the terms of her accreditation to report on the activities of MET Alpha, this reporter was not permitted to interview the scientist or visit his home. Nor was she permitted to write about the discovery of the scientist for three days, and the copy was then submitted for a check by military officials.

“These officials asked that details of what chemicals were uncovered be deleted.... While this reporter could not interview the scientist, she was permitted to see him from a distance at the sites where he said that material from the arms program was buried.”

Miller and her editors not only admit that the military

vetted her story, they virtually boast of it. They have no compunction in reporting that the *Times* reporter functioned not as an independent observer or eyewitness, but as a mouthpiece for Pentagon propaganda.

If Miller's article had carried the headline, "We Believe Because Bush and Rumsfeld Say So," it would have conveyed its precise factual content.

Miller was not in a position to confirm the technical credentials or even the nationality of the alleged scientist, let alone judge his credibility as a witness. Nonetheless, she reported and the *Times* gave great prominence to the claim that he led MET Alpha to "precursors for a toxic agent that is banned by chemical weapons treaties," something that US military officials "described as the most important discovery to date in the hunt for illegal weapons."

Miller repeatedly cited statements made by the scientist to MET Alpha—none of which she actually heard or witnessed—including sweeping claims about the Iraqi weapons program which just happen to dovetail with Bush administration propaganda. She wrote that the scientist described the manufacture of banned weapons and the sharing of chemical and biological weapons technology with Syria, adding that "more recently Iraq was cooperating with Al Qaeda."

The scientist allegedly concluded with the assertion that a few days before the US invasion, Saddam Hussein issued orders for the burial or destruction of chemical weapons and their precursors.

This account conveniently satisfies two requirements of the Bush administration: It maintains that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction on the eve of the war, thus providing a retroactive rationale for the US invasion, and it asserts that these weapons no longer exist, providing an explanation for the failure of the US government to find them.

As of Tuesday, there had been no comment on Miller's report from the US Central Command, the Pentagon or Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

This is not the first time that Judith Miller has served in the capacity of propagandist for the US military/intelligence complex, specializing in journalistic damage-control operations. On September 4-5 2001, a week before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, she wrote a two-part series in the *Times* that purported to be an exposure

of a secret US germ warfare program.

The articles were actually written in direct collaboration with the Pentagon, which gave Miller and a colleague from ABC television access to Dugway Proving Ground, one of the most sensitive sites for the US biological warfare program. Miller portrayed the germ warfare program as strictly defensive, writing, "Officials stressed that the plant never made anthrax or any other lethal pathogen."

This claim was later proven false. Dugway made weapons-grade anthrax which was then sent to Fort Detrick, Maryland, where it was obtained by the right-wing terrorist who mailed it to two leading Senate Democrats and several news media personalities less than a month after Miller's article appeared. The Dugway project was in direct violation of the biological weapons treaty that the US government signed in 1972. The Bush administration has sought to block renewal or enforcement of the treaty.

In Miller's articles on germ warfare, truth and lies were mixed together, resulting in a cover-up masquerading as a daring exposé. Her latest opus is an even more brazen piece of Pentagon disinformation.

Her *Times* article is entirely constructed from anonymous assertions, none of which are susceptible to independent confirmation. Leaving aside the obvious political motivations behind such a piece, it is, from the standpoint of elementary journalistic standards, a fraud that no reputable newspaper would allow to be published. The fact that the *Times* feels no obligation to adhere to such standards is a measure of the degradation of this newspaper, in particular, and American journalism in general.



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