

An exchange with a US war correspondent

24 May 2003

On April 12, the WSWS posted a comment by David Walsh on the battlefield deaths of Washington Post columnist Michael Kelly and NBC correspondent David Bloom, at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/apr2003/jour-a12.shtml>. The following letter from “Embedded war correspondent” Sig Christenson of the San Antonio Express-News was received May 16. David Walsh replies below.

Dear Sir or Madam,

What a hateful column David Walsh has written about Michael Kelly.

In all my life I’ve never read anything so ugly.

I got to know Mike before and during the war. I found him to be a fine, decent man.

As we walked together along the waterfront of Kuwait City just before we were assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division, I encountered a man who had a deep love of his wife, children and in-laws. He mused about taking one of the many dilapidated wooden boats we saw in the harbor not far from the Sharq Market back home to the States and rebuilding it in his spare time.

On the night of the division’s dash across the Karbala Gap, our final conversation before he and Sgt. 1st Class Wilbert Davis, 40, of Tampa, Fla., died when their Humvee flipped into a ditch outside Baghdad, Mike and I shared our thoughts about modern warfare. He was a keen observer, and I retired that night somewhat envious of his intellect and his book project.

Mike had told me he left *The Atlantic* after a short but successful tenure there to spend more time with his family. We walked 10 miles one afternoon in Kuwait and later endured the many privations of life in the desert so we could chronicle the war for our readers back home.

That was a noble pursuit and one full of risk. Mike, who I found bright, soft-spoken and considerate, deserved better from Mr. Walsh, especially given the violent nature of his death.

Judging from what I have read of his work, I could conclude Mr. Walsh is a cold-blooded, knee-jerk reactionary more intent on defending his ideology than celebrating humanity.

Yet if he were to die tomorrow in a jeep accident, drowning in ditch water as Mike did, it would be fundamentally indecent and mean-spirited of me to sketch such a portrait.

As we know, Mr. Walsh didn’t hold back in his cheap parting shot. He offered a pithy rationalization for that, writing: “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.”

Perhaps we are asked not to speak ill of the dead because they no longer can defend themselves. There may be other reasons. Yet while I would agree with Mr. Walsh’s suggestion that there are exceptions to this rule, he failed to note that those moments would be reserved for such ruthless tyrants as Adolph Hitler, Josef Stalin and Saddam Hussein.

Strangely, Mr. Walsh failed to address the demands of historical truth—which in this case would be that Mike Kelly, no matter what he had written, couldn’t be lumped in with the likes of those men, three of the world’s most notorious mass murderers of the past century.

David Walsh also dared to accuse Mike of making “a name for himself by the vitriol of his right-wing commentary,” and then called him “an out-

and-out scoundrel and warmonger.”

What a revealing statement, at once inarticulate, inaccurate and infused with vitriol.

What a little man you are, Mr. Walsh.

Sig Christenson

Embedded war correspondent

San Antonio Express-News/Hearst News Service

Mr. Christenson,

Your response to my article on the deaths of *Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly and *NBC* reporter David Bloom embodies the unseriousness, lack of principle and moral blindness that characterize American media members as a group.

The argument in your letter amounts to this: I’ve written a “hateful” and “ugly” piece; I ought not to have criticized Kelly because he was a “fine, decent man” and we should only speak ill of “mass murderers” after their deaths.

Your letter, although full of righteous indignation, manages to evade every substantive issue raised in the original article: the nature of the war against Iraq, the role performed by the US media in aiding and abetting the Bush administration and the specific part played by Michael Kelly (and David Bloom) in that process. Sidestepping these historical and political questions is of course the *modus operandi* of the US media at present.

The *World Socialist Web Site* did not lightly undertake a critical obituary of Michael Kelly. The headline of the piece read, “The battlefield deaths of American journalists Michael Kelly and David Bloom: *some hard truths*.” [Emphasis added.] When I cited the ancient admonition “not to speak ill of the dead,” it was not done ritualistically. In such a case, one has to resist a natural tendency to turn a blind eye to the faults or failings of the recently deceased.

My article argued that certain situations, such as the criminal invasion of Iraq, and the actions of certain individuals, for example, Kelly’s bloodthirsty propagandizing for that invasion, warranted overcoming that reticence. I fully stand by that assertion.

You describe Kelly in glowing terms, as “a fine, decent man,” a “keen observer” and someone whose “intellect” you envied. In regard to the latter point, each to his own. As to Kelly’s personality, following his death in a jeep accident in early April a variety of media figures, most of them from the ultra-right, commented about what a lovely fellow he was. I have no way of judging, not having met the man. I can only evaluate Kelly based on his activities as a public figure, i.e., what he wrote in his various columns and the socio-political views he defended.

If Kelly was so fine and decent, why did he advocate such vile, murderous policies? In your letter you avoid replying to my citations from his pieces, so let me reprint a few of them for your benefit.

As I noted, “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).

Kelly's writing was the prose equivalent of the chant US military personnel apparently now routinely learn in basic training: "Blood makes the grass grow. Kill! Kill! Kill!"

In passing, you suggest in your letter that one reason for not speaking ill of the dead is that "they no longer can defend themselves." If it will help clarify matters, let me point out that we denounced Michael Kelly in precisely the same language when he was alive and prominently situated within the US media establishment. Following his scurrilous red-baiting attack on the Workers World Party for its role in the anti-war movement in January, we noted that "Kelly and his ilk" were "political scoundrels in the service of reaction," and observed further: "Kelly is one of many journalistic thugs in the service of the American plutocracy. There are dozens of them—the Krauthammers, Coulters, Sowell, Wills, etc., secreted out of the pores of an elite increasingly insulated from the general population and hostile to democratic rights. Their vocation, for which they are handsomely paid, is pumping out lies and filth on a daily basis." There is no reason to withdraw that characterization now.

Leaving aside the issue of whether Hitler (the German fascist, enemy of socialism and murderer of the Jews), Stalin (the leader of the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy in the USSR) and Saddam Hussein (the bourgeois nationalist Iraqi leader, assisted at critical moments during his hold on power by the US government) can be so easily lumped together, your assertion that only "ruthless tyrants" should be dealt with harshly in death hardly stands up to scrutiny.

At any rate, a number of prominent American writers and social critics have not subscribed to your view. One only has to recall H.L. Mencken's scathing 1925 obituary of William Jennings Bryan, the one-time populist leader and defender of creationism, which began, "Has it been marked by historians that the late William Jennings Bryan's last secular act on this earth was to catch flies? A curious detail, and not without its sardonic overtones. He was the most sedulous flycatcher in American history, and by long odds the most successful." Another excerpt: "If the fellow [Bryan] was sincere, then so was P.T. Barnum. The word is disgraced and degraded by such uses. He was, in fact, a charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without any shame or dignity. What animated him from end to end of his grotesque career was ambition."

If you characterize an objective assessment of Michael Kelly's ideas and career as "hateful" and "ugly," it is because this type of "hard truth" appears so rarely in the subservient and superficial American media.

You fail in your response to my article to explain your own attitude toward the war in Iraq. This, however, was at the heart of the comment on Kelly's death and formed the basis of our assessment of him.

The principal pretexts for the assault on Iraq, that the Hussein regime possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and that the US was intervening to "liberate" the Iraqi people, both of which appeared in Kelly's malicious columns, have been exposed by the course of the war and its aftermath.

The first matter can be dealt with in a sentence. No "weapons of mass destruction" have been discovered because there weren't any to be found and the American government knowingly and repeatedly lied. The

increasingly desperate situation in Iraq, the humanitarian crisis created by the US military's wanton destruction of the country's infrastructure (and tens of thousands of lives) and Washington's failure to provide the most elementary services, the signs of growing popular discontent which will be met with harsh repression—all this points toward an elementary fact already recognized by most of the world's population, if not by you and your brethren in the American media: that the US invaded Iraq not to "liberate" anyone or introduce "democracy," but to assert its dominion over vast supplies of natural resources, in particular, oil.

The invasion of Iraq was an illegal, aggressive act, prepared by a group of criminals in the Bush administration. The US mass media played an indispensable role in transmitting the government's falsehoods, distortions and half-truths to the general public. The media has therefore been an accomplice to a war crime. Are you aware that at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal, following World War II, German propagandists and journalists were also placed on trial? They were charged, among other things, with having inured the German population to crimes committed against the population of countries occupied by German forces.

I have taken the liberty of reading your work as an "embedded war reporter" in the assault on Iraq published in the *San Antonio Express-News*. It fully substantiates my charge as to your "unseriousness, lack of principle and moral blindness."

Your pieces fail to betray any genuine awareness of the implications of the operation in which you took part and publicized, the invasion of a sovereign nation that has carried out no hostile acts against the US, the massive killing of its soldiers and civilians and the establishment of a foreign military dictatorship over its population.

Most of what you write, to be frank, is banal in the extreme. From your March 22 column: "The rumble of thunderous explosions—artillery more than likely—is firing away at something. Boo-oom! Boo-oom! It reminds of any summer afternoon I ever spent in Tallahassee, Fla., where I spent three years during the last decade as the Florida Times-Union's 'roving reporter.'"

"That was a great job, but being military writer for the *San Antonio Express-News* is better. I've traveled the world following the US military and have met troops from Camp Red Cloud in Korea to M1 tank crews in Hohenfels, Germany. Drank a lot of good Asian and German beer along the way, and have the belly to prove it."

Your column of March 30, by which time the US military had set about incinerating entire Iraqi units, was wholly devoted to the loss and finding of a wedding ring in the desert.

You treated more significant issues in passing without working through any of their implications. For example, you reproduced a conversation with a 29-year-old soldier in your March 28 dispatch:

"As the day ended we talked about the war and our country's evolution toward empire. He and I both saw the amazing similarities between ancient Rome and America. Then he raised the troubling question I hear few too people ask, one our country has yet to answer but must if it wishes to sustain itself. 'You know the one constant of empires?' he asked. 'They fall,' he said. ... America is a 21st century Rome, a grand colossus that by its very presence influences the world."

Too few people ask this troubling question, including you. This is the first and only time this rather explosive issue is touched upon.

From an April 12 report: "The Iraqis didn't do too well in their defense of the homeland, as the carnage on Highway 8 so convincingly shows. They fought tanks, armored personnel carriers, jets and precision munitions with Datsun pickups. The outcome wouldn't have been different if they had used bows and arrows."

"It was as lopsided as the Ethiopians going up against Nazi Germany's extraordinary army decades ago, a match reminiscent of that between Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner, an obscure boxer made famous by his brief encounter with 'The Greatest.'"

“I wandered down the highway and felt great pity for these people. They had some reason to fight us Americans, and they no doubt had great courage to stand up to us, but I couldn’t fathom them wasting their lives for the creepy likes of Saddam Hussein and family.”

Have you thought about what any of this means? You make a comparison in this passage between the one-sided killing in Iraq and (a) by implication, the mass murder of the Indians and (b) the massacre of Ethiopian soldiers and civilians in the 1930s (not, in fact, at the hands of the German army, but of Mussolini’s military—however, the thought is clear enough).

In other words, you more or less acknowledge that you were witnessing the slaughter of virtually defenseless forces. Does it occur to you that there might be a connection between the Nazi-like military means employed by the US and its reactionary geopolitical aims?

You can write such a passage and then work yourself up into a lather over my “hateful” comment on Kelly, a fervent propagandist not only for this filthy operation but any and all future American military interventions! It is difficult to say which is more reprehensible, Kelly’s depraved enthusiasm for American imperialist crimes or your light-minded response to them. You are a fitting representative of the American “free press,” none of whose leading figures apparently lose a night’s sleep over either a brutal “blitzkrieg” in the Middle East or the destruction of democracy at home.

As a final point, I cannot help but point out the irony of your employment by the “Hearst News Service.” The founder of this enterprise, William Randolph Hearst, then owner of the *New York Morning Journal*, played a prominent role in one of the first American imperialist media campaigns, for war against Spain over a century ago. Hearst’s propaganda demonized Spain for its suppression of Cuban rebels and manipulated public opinion. With the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor in 1898, Hearst had the perfect pretext for war. His press tirelessly asserted that Spain was responsible for the Maine disaster, although this was never proven, and led a successful campaign to involve the US in a one-sided war against a much weaker opponent. You are working in a proud tradition.

David Walsh

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