

The firing of Jayson Blair

Panic and hysteria reign at the New York Times

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12 May 2003

The *New York Times*' extraordinary public denunciation Sunday of one of its junior reporters, Jayson Blair, is a serious episode that warrants close examination. It is a signal of deep crisis, demoralization, panic and cowardice at an institution that has long referred to itself as the "newspaper of record".

Blair, who began his career at the *Times* as an intern in 1998, resigned from the newspaper at the beginning of this month after it was revealed that he had plagiarized an interview given to another newspaper by a woman who lost her son in the Iraq intervention.

In a front-page (above the fold) article entitled "Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," the newspaper charged that Blair, 27, "misled readers and *Times* colleagues with dispatches that purported to be from Maryland, Texas and other states, when often he was far away, in New York. He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He stole material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression that he had been somewhere or seen someone, when he had not."

The *Times* then proceeded to spill out the story of Jayson Blair in a 14,000-word article that spread across more than four full pages. Also published was a page three editor's note explaining that five reporters and a team of researchers had been assigned to investigate the case after receiving "unrestricted access" to the entire staff of the *Times*, including top editors and management at the newspaper.

If the allegations of the *Times* are true, Blair violated basic rules of journalism. That being said, his actions were inappropriate but not all that unusual. The pressure to produce sensationalist news at whatever price that characterizes much of the media creates an environment conducive to cutting corners or juicing up a story with fabricated details.

In point of fact, Blair did not invent stories that never happened—as was the case in similar recent high-profile dismissals of reporters at the *Washington Post* and the *New Republic*. He did not set out to falsely malign anyone or advance some hidden political agenda.

What is so extraordinary, even bizarre, about the reaction of the *Times* is the immense amount of space devoted to the merciless career-shattering exposure of someone who was one of the paper's junior employees, as well as the angry and personal tone that characterizes the paper's denunciation.

The article produced by the *Times* is itself a parody of objective journalism. Veering erratically between an unconvincing presentation of the timeline of Blair's transgression and wildly subjective editorializing, the *Times* describes Blair's actions as "a betrayal of

trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper." It refers to the reporters' laptop and cell phone as "his tools of deceit," and goes so far as to release personal details, stating that he had "considerable personal problems," suggesting that he suffered from alcoholism and revealing that he had been referred to a company counseling program.

That is not all. The article descends into vindictive character assassination, stating that Blair was considered by unnamed "others" to be "immature, with a hungry ambition and an unsettling interest in newsroom gossip."

From a legal standpoint, the *Times*' reaction can only be described as grossly inappropriate. The normal procedure in such a case would be to issue a carefully worded statement worked out in collaboration with the company's lawyers. The colossal overreaction will undoubtedly leave the newspaper vulnerable to legal action, if Blair chooses to pursue such a remedy.

Blair's alleged offenses should be placed in a broader political context. To describe his lifting of quotations and false description of scenic details as a "low point" in the history of the *Times* is absurd.

This was the newspaper, after all, that employed Walter Duranty in the 1930s, the correspondent who deliberately covered up the crimes of Stalin and defended the integrity of the Moscow frame-up trials that led to the physical liquidation of the leading figures of the October 1917 revolution and inaugurated a wholesale reign of terror by the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands. The *Times* still proudly lists Duranty as one of its Pulitzer Prize winners.

During World War II, the newspaper made an editorial decision to suppress coverage of the Holocaust in which six million Jews were exterminated.

There are certainly more recent incidents beside which Blair's alleged behavior pales to insignificance. In 1999-2000, the newspaper led a full-throated witch hunt against Chinese-American scientist Wen Ho Lee, described by the White House as "explosive and near hysterical investigative reporting," that led to Lee's imprisonment for nine months and could have helped bring about his trial and execution.

The newspaper offered only a grudging apology for its reprehensible victimization of Lee and did not discipline any of the reporters involved. But in contrast to the actions of Blair, which were without any obvious malicious intent, the witch hunt of Wen Ho Lee arose out of the right-wing agenda of *Times* reporter Jeff Gerth. This was the same man who earlier had initiated the newspaper's obsessive and unprincipled investigation of former President Clinton's Whitewater

investment.

The hysterical campaign against Blair supposed “deception” is unfolding in the immediate aftermath of a war that was justified on the basis of patent lies by the Bush administration, justified and defended by the media as a whole and the *Times* in particular. Having promoted aggression against Iraq on the grounds that it was necessary to eliminate “weapons of mass destruction”, the newspaper’s senior foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman recently wrote, “Bush doesn’t owe the world any explanation for missing chemical weapons (even if it turns out that the White House hyped this issue).”

Thus, lying—by both the government and the *Times*—to promote a war in which tens of thousands of people die is not a problem, but copying a quote from another newspaper is a capital offense. Such are the paper’s journalistic standards.

One only has to compare Blair’s conduct to that of one of the newspaper’s more senior correspondents, Judith Miller, who has served as a willing conduit for misinformation from neo-conservative circles promoting war. She has specialized in stories built on not a single verifiable fact, repeatedly proclaiming evidence substantiating the existence of “weapons of mass destruction”. The *Times* recently insisted that the fact that Ms. Miller is associated with the right-wing, pro-Zionist Middle East Forum of Daniel Pipes, which has advocated war not only against Iraq but Syria and Lebanon as well, was no violation of the paper’s standards of objectivity.

The extraordinary treatment given to Blair is symptomatic of a deep-going political crisis within the *Times* management. What essentially amounted to an issue of employee discipline not that different from those seen in virtually any mid-sized business in America has been dealt with as if it were an exposure of the crime of the century.

A \$7 billion corporation has fallen with its full weight upon someone it itself describes as a troubled young man, effectively ruining his prospects for future employment and blackguarding his reputation before the entire world. The organization has itself been turned upside down, with the newsroom becoming the arena for what amounts to hostile interrogations. One is left with the sense of a week of insanity at the *Times*.

There have been rumors for some time that since Howell Raines took over as the paper’s executive editor internal relations have been marked by turmoil. Under his tenure its political line has been marked by a further shift to the right. But with this latest episode, there is a definite suggestion that the newspaper’s management totally lost its head.

The lead article on Blair published in the Sunday *Times* concludes with a statement from publisher Arthur Sulzberger assuring that the paper is not looking for “scapegoats”. He states: “The person who did this is Jayson Blair. Let’s not begin to demonize our executives—either the desk editors or the executive editor or, dare I say, the publisher.” Does Sulzberger fear that his position and that of Raines are threatened by this episode, and, if so, by whom? That such a possibility is even mentioned provides an insight into the intense political pressures building up behind the scenes.

The war in Iraq and the turn by Washington toward a policy of unabashed imperialism has spelled a profound shift in political relations within the US and its ruling circles. At the same time, what the Bush administration describes as a continuing global “war on terrorism” has been accompanied by sweeping attacks on democratic rights and an increasing clampdown on press freedoms.

The media, and the *Times* in particular, have bowed to this government pressure, covering up for its abuses, allowing the lying

justifications for the Iraq war to go unchallenged and submitting themselves to military discipline in the reporting of the war itself.

While the *Times* adapts itself to the right, this does not mean that the right adapts itself to the *Times*. Within the ultra-reactionary circles that play a decisive role within the Bush administration, the *New York Times* is still seen as a bastion of liberalism, if not a nest of communist sympathizers. Right-wing talk-show hosts and commentators regularly rage against the paper.

When the revelations regarding Blair’s alleged misconduct broke, the paper clearly felt itself under immense pressure. The stories about which he supposedly invented details or borrowed quotes touched upon such sensitive subjects as the dead and wounded of the Iraq war and the Jessica Lynch story, which was being transformed into a new American myth.

No doubt the *Times* management further feared, with good reason, that the fact that the reporter was black would be seized upon by the right wing as a means of furthering its poisonous demagoguery against affirmative action and its general diatribe against liberalism and the paper itself.

Clearly, the newspaper’s management felt itself under siege. Rather than stand up to such threats, Sulzberger and Raines responded with panic and cowardice. Almost as astonishing as their wild denunciations of Blair is their pathetic and debasing exercise in self-flagellation. It proclaims that “The *Times* must repair the damage done to the public trust,” confesses that “something clearly broke down in the *Times* newsroom”, and mournfully informs the world that “the atmosphere of a disliked relative’s protracted wake pervades the newsroom.”

The *Times*’ reaction is symptomatic of the moth-eaten state of what passes for liberalism in today’s America.

In an earlier period, the *Times* was associated with defying the Nixon administration with the publication of the Pentagon Papers and pursuing the Watergate revelations that ultimately brought down the government.

In repudiating that history and bowing to right-wing pressure, the *Times* management is aiding and abetting what is developing into a sweeping assault on fundamental democratic rights, including freedom of the press. There is little doubt that the Blair affair will have a chilling effect on reporters generally, and that the new rules that the newspaper is developing will further discourage objective investigative journalism to the extent that it cuts across the interests of those in power.



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