

Jayson Blair and Judith Miller

Journalistic ethics, hypocrisy and war at the New York Times

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The *New York Times* Sunday carried out what amounted to the public vilification of a junior reporter, Jayson Blair, for his alleged use of lifted quotes and invented details in a number of stories he wrote for the newspaper. The *Times* management has engaged in an extraordinary round of breast-beating over the affair, describing it as a “betrayal” of both the paper’s readers and its employees.

Blair is accused of plagiarizing quotes and sentences from other newspapers as well as fabricating details about several stories. He is charged with pretending that he was covering stories in the field, when he actually had written them from New York.

All of these actions would be serious violations of journalistic ethics and, according to the *Times* report, they proved troubling for some of the subjects of these stories. They also would involve deception of both Blair’s employers and fellow journalists. If true, this conduct would without question be grounds for severe discipline, including dismissal. Such action would appropriately be accompanied by a sober notice to inform readers about the incident, while keeping in mind that the newspaper was dealing with someone that it itself described as “troubled young man.”

The actions of Blair, while grossly inappropriate, are hardly unknown within the media. An unfortunate atmosphere of sensationalism combined with a competitive environment and largely superficial writing create conditions where such conduct can occur. What would seem unusual in Blair’s case, given that the charges made by the *Times* are true, is the level of recklessness that opened him up to exposure.

One is forced to evaluate this conduct now, however, in the light of the extraordinary response of the *Times*, which chose to make Blair’s case a world event, dropping the journalistic equivalent of a fuel-air explosive on him. The more than four-page denunciation of him in the Sunday paper went far beyond an objective recounting of his transgression. Rather the paper launched a vitriolic and cruel personal assault on this individual.

Blair’s alleged violations of journalistic ethics must also be viewed in the context of the kind of behavior that the newspaper is prepared to tolerate. The diatribe against the young reporter described his conduct as a “low point” in the paper’s 152-year history. But in reality, his deceptions were of a relatively minor significance from the standpoint of providing an objective account of developments to the newspaper’s readers. Blair did not attempt to deceive the public for the purpose of furthering some hidden agenda.

The same cannot be said, however, for the work of Judith Miller. Assigned to Iraq, Miller has been the source in recent weeks of sensational stories purporting to substantiate US charges concerning the existence of chemical and biological weapons in the conquered Middle Eastern country. Having appeared in the *Times*, these stories have been picked up by the cable news channels, radio and other mass media and presented

virtually as proof in and of themselves.

The biggest of her “scoops” came in an April 21 article titled “Illicit Arms Kept Till Eve of War, An Iraqi Scientist Is Said to Assert.” The story had everything the administration could have wished for in terms of justifying not only the aggression against Iraq, but also a future invasion of Syria, reportedly favored by some of the right-wingers in the leadership of the Pentagon.

It cited an Iraqi scientist as saying that Iraq had destroyed its chemical weapons stocks just days before the US invasion. He supposedly also stated that the Iraqi regime had collaborated with Al-Qaeda and had secretly shared “weapons of mass destruction” with Syria.

Coming at a time of mounting questions about the failure by American occupation forces to find any sign of weapons of mass destruction—whose alleged existence was the fundamental pretext for the US invasion—the story was seemingly a stunning vindication of the Pentagon and the Bush administration. It substantiated the claims made by Secretary of State Powell before the United Nations Security Council—accepted uncritically by the *Times*—that Iraq had amassed hundreds of tons of biological and chemical agents as well as the missiles to deliver them, while at the same time it offered an explanation as to why not a trace of these weapons could be found.

The only problem was that the only sources for these revelations were Miller and the Pentagon. She included in her story an extraordinary disclaimer that was largely ignored by the broadcast media that hyped her account as proof of the administration’s claims. It read:

“Under the terms of her accreditation to report on the activities of MET Alpha [a military unit assigned to hunt for WMDs], 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.

“Those officials asked that details of what chemicals were uncovered be deleted. They said they feared that such information could jeopardize the scientist’s safety by identifying the part of the weapons program where he worked.”

In other words, the only source that Miller had for what the scientist had to say, indeed for his very existence, was the US military. She did nothing to substantiate the identity of this individual, much less to verify his claims. She moreover agreed to prior military censorship as well as the withholding of information and the delay of the story itself.

In the case of Blair, the *Times* spoke mournfully of “pain resonating through” its newsroom, whose atmosphere resembled a “protracted wake.” The paper never bothered, however, to describe the uproar in the newsroom over Miller’s piece. Published reports citing *Times* reporters said that there was shock and dismay over the publication of an article on the newspaper’s front page promoting wildly unsubstantiated claims

concerning the most important world development in recent history.

With the Blair case, a sober “editors’ note” was published on page three, detailing the *Times*’ response to the reporter’s alleged misconduct as well as plans to review newsroom procedures.

No such note was forthcoming with Miller’s piece, though it certainly was far more warranted than in Blair’s case. After all, her story concerned the justification for a war that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people and launched the US into a openly colonialist venture.

There should have been some explanation to the readers that the newspaper had decided to suspend its normal rule that it publish only those news stories that contain verifiable facts; that general journalistic principles of questioning the motives of the story’s source, the demand for independent confirmation and the requirement that opposing views be sought out were all to be ignored. As for the grounds for such an extraordinary change in policy, the editors would have had to admit the truth: it suited the interests of the US government and the ideological prejudices of the reporter herself.

The *Times* reporter, meanwhile, has continued these joint efforts with the Pentagon. On the very day that the newspaper filled more than four pages with denunciations of its former junior reporter Jayson Blair, another Miller piece appeared asserting that “experts” searching for WMD evidence had concluded a truck found in northern Iraq was a mobile biological weapons laboratory. Once again, none of Miller’s sources—all of whom belong to the same military team—are named. She did not say whether this article was submitted for prior censorship.

As with the story of the mysterious Iraqi scientist, Miller’s piece was picked up by television and radio news and made the lead item of the day.

Curiously, the very same day, the *Washington Post* published a story reviewing the work of the very same units that Miller has been following. Unlike her pieces, however, the *Post* story quotes members of the team by name. Titled “Task force unable to find any weapons,” the story states, “The group directing all known US search efforts for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is winding down operations without finding proof that President Saddam Hussein kept clandestine stocks of outlawed arms.”

It goes on to affirm that while members of the task force expected to find the hundreds of tons of weapons materials described by Powell at the UN, “scores of fruitless missions broke that confidence, many task force members said.”

The phrase “smoking gun is now a term of dark irony here,” the *Post* reports, citing Major Kenneth Deal, executive officer of one of the teams, sarcastically yelling out the words after finding a page torn from a history volume at one site.

It also points out that the very unit that Miller cited as her source for the Iraqi scientist’s supposed revelations—MET Alpha—is no longer even looking for WMDs. Instead it has been reassigned to investigate alleged Iraqi covert operations and to search for stolen Jewish antiquities. The name of the unit’s commander, incidentally, is included in the *Post* story.

One unnamed source, a Defense Intelligence Agency Officer, summed up the WMD hunt: “We came to bear country, we came loaded for bear and we found out the bear wasn’t here.”

The *Post* article amounts to a devastating exposure of the lies that served as the pretext for Washington’s predatory war against Iraq. It was written based on named military sources who provided credible testimony that completely discredited the pretensions of the Bush administration, the Pentagon and, incidentally, Judith Miller.

How can one account for such a marked contradiction between the story presented by the *Post* and the version written by Miller? To answer this question, one must delve into the *Times* reporter’s background.

Miller has been a reporter for some two decades, specializing in the Middle East and “weapons of mass destruction.” Her sources have consisted largely of US and Israeli intelligence agencies with which she has cemented close relations. One indication of this relationship was a

1993 story that was based on her being invited to witness the interrogation of a Palestinian-American who was unlawfully detained for weeks by Israeli security forces on suspicion of links to terrorism.

Publishing a series of books dealing with both Islam and weapons of mass destruction, Miller established her reputation within an interlocking group of right-wing think tanks that have long promoted US war against Iraq and the defense of Israel. The leading figures in these organizations now dominate the civilian leadership of the Pentagon. She co-authored a book on Iraq with Laurie Mylroie, a Middle East expert at the American Enterprise Institute, who is identified with the thoroughly discredited theories that the Saddam Hussein regime was behind not only the September 11, 2001 attacks, but subsequent anthrax attacks on the US Capitol as well as the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

Both Mylroie and Miller are connected to the Middle East Forum, a right-wing pro-Israeli lobbying group that describes its mission as “promoting American interests in the Middle East.” The key figure in this organization is Daniel Pipes, who argues in a recent article that the US has no “moral obligation” to provide humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people and that the war in Iraq must be judged less by “the welfare of the defeated than by the gains of the victors.” The organization lists as its key goals “strong ties to Israel” and a “stable supply and cheap price of oil.”

The Middle East Forum not only advocated a war against Iraq, but has promoted the use of US military force to expel Syrian forces from Lebanon as well.

Miller is listed on the organization’s panel of “experts” available for speaking engagements on “militant Islam” and “biological warfare.” Other “experts” include William Kristol, the editor of the right-wing *Weekly Standard*, and Martin Kramer, the Zionist academic who, together with Pipes, founded Campus Watch, an organization dedicated to creating a blacklist and dossiers on professors deemed hostile to the U.S. and Israel.

According to the *Times*’ ethics guidelines, its reporters are barred from participation in groups that “seek to shape public policy,” in order to avoid damaging the newspaper’s “reputation for strict neutrality in reporting on politics and government.” By any objective standard, Miller is in violation of this rule. Politically aligned with the very forces that promoted a war against Iraq on the false pretext of eliminating a threat of weapons of mass destruction, she has been assigned by the *Times* to the beat of digging up evidence to substantiate that pretext.

Those in charge at the *Times* are indifferent to this gross conflict of interest and are perfectly content to publish what amounts to politically motivated stories based on unsubstantiated and in all likelihood false allegations.

This form of lying, which has immense consequences in term of promoting government disinformation to justify an illegal war, is routine at the *Times*. Alongside it, the alleged sins of Jayson Blair are small potatoes indeed.

The paper’s publisher Arthur Sulzberger and its executive editor Howell Raines, however, have no fear that they will suffer any serious consequences for fabricating news, so long as it is in the service of the Bush administration’s policies. They can be confident that their stories will be picked up and praised by the right wing as evidence that even the “liberals” at the *Times* accept the administration’s lies as good coin.

In the Blair case, however, they had no reason to expect such immunity. They knew that a young black reporter, accused of misrepresenting his connection to stories touching on sensitive topics such as the Washington, DC sniper and the wounded and missing US troops of the Iraq war, would become the focus of a campaign of denunciations by the ultra-right. Fearing the consequences in the present environment of political intimidation and threats to democratic rights, the *Times* management sought to preempt any attack by carrying out the public humiliation of Jayson Blair.



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