

New York Times reporter Judith Miller accused of “hijacking” military unit in Iraq

More on the “newspaper of record” and WMD lies

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27 June 2003

Three months into their occupation of Iraq, US military forces have failed to find any evidence of the supposed stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons that Washington claimed as the principal justification for invading the country. It is no longer possible to conceal the fact that the Bush administration lied to the American people to promote an unprovoked war of aggression.

In a column published June 25, the *Washington Post's* media critic Howard Kurtz sheds new light on the integral role played by the media itself, and, in particular, the “newspaper of record,” the *New York Times*, in this act of criminal deception.

In a war that saw “embedded” journalists functioning as cheerleaders for the American military and the media serving as a propaganda arm of the Bush administration, the *Times* played an especially sordid role. Its duplicity was exemplified by one of its senior correspondents, Judith Miller, who is reputed in media circles to be an expert in weapons of mass destruction as well as on Islam, despite her lack of a science background and her inability to speak Arabic. When she initially joined the *Times* staff, Miller’s beat was the banking and securities industry.

In her capacity as a Middle East and WMD “expert,” Miller has functioned as a conduit for stories originating in US military and intelligence agencies, particularly those elements promoting the war against Iraq. In her recent reporting from occupied Iraq, this relationship has grown even more incestuous.

Citing multiple military sources, the *Post's* Kurtz describes Miller’s “hijacking” of a US Army unit assigned to search for weapons of mass destruction, or WMD. According to Kurtz’s account, Miller played a key role in turning the unit—Mobile Exploitation Team (MET) Alpha—into what army officials characterized as a “rogue operation.”

According to Kurtz: “In April, Miller wrote a letter objecting to an Army commander’s order to withdraw the unit...from the field. She said this would be a ‘waste’ of time and suggested that she would write about it unfavorably in the *Times*. After Miller took up the matter with a two-star general, the pullback order was dropped.”

Apparently, US military commanders had concluded that the hunt for non-existent WMD had become a “waste” of the army’s time, but Miller, who was embedded with the unit, was operating on her own agenda and managed to overrule them.

In her letter, quoted in the *Post* column, she wrote: “I intend to write about this decision in the NY Times to send a successful team back home just as progress on WMD is being made.” Military officers quoted by Kurtz reported that Miller regularly told army personnel that she would go directly to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld or Undersecretary Douglas Feith about decisions with which she disagreed. “Essentially, she threatened them,” said one officer.

In an article published last month by the *Post*, Kurtz disclosed an

internal e-mail exchange between Miller and John Burns, the *Times' Baghdad* bureau chief. Burns had protested Miller’s filing a major story on Ahmed Chalabi after he had assigned the piece to another reporter. Chalabi, a convicted embezzler, heads the Iraqi National Congress, the US-financed exile group that forged close relations with the Pentagon’s civilian leadership in the run-up to the war.

Miller fired back that she was entitled to the interview as she had forged a relationship with Chalabi over the course of a decade. She noted, “He [Chalabi] has provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD in our paper.”

The admission was extremely revealing, as Miller never cited Chalabi in her WMD “exclusives.” That he was the source was unquestionably a matter of interest, given that the US intelligence community has long raised doubts about the credibility of information coming from Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress. Both State Department and CIA officials had cautioned that the exile group fashioned “intelligence” in order to promote a US invasion that the group believed would place it in power at the head of a colonial-style puppet regime.

One of the Miller “exclusives,” published on the front page of the April 21 edition of the *New York Times*, provoked sharp criticism within the newspaper’s own newsroom. The story, based entirely on hearsay, claimed an Iraqi scientist had revealed that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons up to the eve of the US invasion, but had destroyed them. The unnamed scientist purportedly showed US troops “building blocks” of such weapons. The same story floated the claim—attributed to the scientist—that Iraq had cooperated with Al Qaeda. (See “Manufacturing the news: *New York Times* report on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction,” April 23, 2003).

The sole source of Miller’s story was the MET Alpha unit in which she was embedded. She acknowledged in the article that she had followed military orders not to speak to the “scientist,” nor seek in any way to corroborate the claims of the military. She further noted that she had submitted her story to military officials for approval.

It was a straight case of the *Times* serving as a conduit for Pentagon propaganda.

Subsequently, Miller reported the US military’s discovery of two “mobile bio-warfare labs,” which Bush promptly cited as proof of Iraqi WMD. The scientific community and large sections of US and British intelligence have since concluded that the charge was false and the vehicles were designed to do precisely what the Iraqis claimed: to provide hydrogen for balloons used to direct artillery fire. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported recently, the US military has a fleet of vehicles designed for precisely the same purpose.

Other Miller “exclusives” carried the following headlines: “US experts find radioactive material in Iraq,” and “US-led forces occupy Baghdad

complex filled with chemical agents.” In each case, the sensational claims, providing welcome grist for the Bush administration’s propaganda mill, quickly proved unfounded.

As per the US media’s standard practice, Miller’s *Times* revelations were picked up by the broadcast news outlets and given great play. The subsequent stories discrediting Miller’s scoops were generally buried in the inside pages of the *Times* and barely noted, if mentioned at all, by the broader media.

As Kurtz makes clear in his latest piece, Miller was more than a mouthpiece for the Pentagon. She played an active, at times even leading, role in the US military’s operations in occupied Iraq. A key element in the extraordinary influence wielded by the reporter was her relationship with Chalabi. She apparently functioned as a liaison between the US military and the Iraqi exile group, passing on intelligence that the Iraqi National Congress was confident she would use to achieve their aims.

In one instance, according to the *Post*, she led US Army officers to Chalabi’s headquarters to accept the surrender of Saddam Hussein’s son-in-law, and then participated in his initial interrogation.

Kurtz quoted an Iraqi National Congress official as saying the idea of handing the Iraqi ex-ruler’s son-in-law over to the MET Alpha team was proposed by Miller. “We told Judy because we thought it was a good story,” he said. “We needed some way to get the guy to the Americans.”

The *Post* article also includes one piece of information suggesting that Miller’s embedded role in the MET Alpha unit and reportage for the *Times* were colored by personal relationships. The *Times* reporter, it said, “formed a friendship with MET Alpha’s leader,” Chief Warrant Officer Richard Gonzalez. According to Kurtz, “several officers said they were surprised when she participated in a Baghdad ceremony in which Gonzalez was promoted. She pinned the rank to his uniform, an eyewitness said, and Gonzalez thanked Miller for her contributions.”

Whatever Miller’s personal ties, her influence was based above all on her pursuit, in the guise of news reporting, of a political agenda. She shared and promoted the militaristic and colonialist agenda of those in the Bush administration, in particular the right-wing civilian leadership of the Pentagon, who had advocated a war against Iraq for years and set about to provoke one as soon as they took office.

Miller’s connection to these elements stems from her ties to an interlocking network of right-wing and pro-Zionist think tanks that includes the American Enterprise Institute, the Hudson Institute, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Middle East Forum.

The last of these groups included Miller on its list of “experts,” available for speaking engagements on “militant Islam” and “biological warfare.” Since her ties to the organization were widely reported—including by the WWSW [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/may2003/nyt-m13.shtml] and in an article written by Daniel Forbes for Globalvision News Network (http://www.gvnews.net/html/DailyNews/alert4324.html)—the Middle East Forum (MEF) has quietly dropped Miller’s name from the section of its web site listing its panel of experts. Whether the action was taken by MEF independently or at Miller’s request, the intent is the same—to cover her political tracks.

Led by Daniel Pipes, the MEF not only advocated war against Iraq, but has urged US invasions of Syria and Lebanon as well. Its stated goals for US policy include “strong ties to Israel” and a “stable supply and cheap price of oil.” In addition to MEF, Pipes directs Campus Watch, a group dedicated to maintaining a blacklist of professors who are targeted for being hostile to Israel and US interests in the Middle East.

Last month, the management of the *New York Times* initiated an extraordinary exposure of a junior reporter, Jayson Blair, who had copied details and quotes from other news sources and filed stories with out-of-state datelines while writing from New York. The paper excoriated Blair—someone whom the paper itself described as

“troubled”—characterizing his actions as a “betrayal” and the worst episode in the *Times*’ 152-year history.

The evidence suggests that Judith Miller is guilty of deception that goes far beyond anything Blair ever imagined. While Blair’s misconduct may have offended some of those to whom he attributed invented quotes or whose work he plagiarized, there was nothing in the reports filed under his byline that fundamentally distorted news developments. In Miller’s case, however, news reports based on anonymous sources and hearsay, which subsequently proved false, served a hidden political agenda and played a direct role in promoting an illegal war.

Certain questions are posed: Who is Judith Miller? Is she herself an intelligence operative? If so, for which agencies: American, Israeli? Her extraordinary actions make such questions entirely appropriate.

But the *Times* is steadfastly defending Miller. “We think she did really good work there,” *Times* Assistant Managing Editor Andrew Rosenthal told Kurtz. “We think she broke some important stories.” He dismissed the charges made by a half-dozen military officers concerning her conduct with MET Alpha as “baseless” and “idiotic.”

Even if one leaves aside her reactionary politics, from the standpoint of the most elementary principles of journalistic ethics and professionalism, Miller’s record is indefensible. Any honest, self-respecting newspaper would fire her, issue an apology, and make a public accounting of her actions. It would clean house, ridding itself of all those who participated in her deceptions. Such a newspaper, however, is not to be found in the major American media, all of which are implicated in the business of fronting for intelligence agencies, the military, the White House and other segments of the state apparatus—none more so than the *New York Times*.

The Miller-MET Alpha affair is a devastating exposure of the degeneration of the American media and its incestuous relationship with the American ruling elite. Increasingly monopolized by a handful of vast corporations and staffed in its upper echelons by a layer of *nouveau riche*, who depend upon government handouts and approval for their “scoops” and book deals, the US mass media has been fashioned over the past period into a dependable propaganda arm for the state and defender of the social interests of the country’s financial elite.

While Miller’s conduct may represent a particularly glaring breach of what once were considered basic journalistic standards, it is by no means unique. At the White House, as veteran New York columnist Jimmy Breslin recently noted, “The newspeople stand when the president comes into the room. They really do. They don’t sit until he tells them to. You tell them a lie and they say, ‘Sir.’”

The conception that arose in the period of the 18th century bourgeois revolutions that the press constituted a “Fourth Estate,” serving as a watchdog over those who wielded power in society, is clearly an anachronism in 21st century America. The debasement and corruption of the media are profound symptoms of the decomposition of American democracy.



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