

# The Times' Thomas Friedman on Iraq: spreading "democracy" with missiles and lies

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Amid mounting revelations of Bush administration lies concerning its reasons for going to war against Iraq, a chorus of media pundits has rallied to the president's defense by responding, "So what?"

These commentators argue that the "16 words" in the State of the Union address citing intelligence allegedly proving that Iraq tried to buy uranium in Africa were no big deal—despite the fact that this bogus claim played a major role in the administration's attempt to terrorize the public with a nonexistent Iraqi nuclear threat. Or, they assert, the issue of government deception pales beside various ex post facto rationalizations for the war—Saddam Hussein's repression, the "liberation" of the Iraqi people, etc.

One of the most repugnant examples of this second line of defense is to be found—as it often is—in the writings of the chief foreign columnist of the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman. In a July 16 column entitled "Winning the Real War," Friedman hails the formation of an Iraqi "governing council," handpicked by the US colonial administrator L. Paul Bremer, as the real "liberation" of Iraq, and "the most important day in its modern history."

After chiding the media for failing to celebrate this supposed historical milestone, focusing instead on the unfolding controversy over Bush's lie about African uranium, Friedman writes: "... it is a disturbing thought that the Bush team could get itself so tied up defending its phony reasons for going to war—the notion that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction that were undeterrable and could threaten us, or that he had links with Al Qaeda—that it could get distracted from fulfilling the real and valid reason for the war: to install a decent, tolerant, pluralistic, multireligious government in Iraq..."

Friedman glibly acknowledges that Bush lied to the

American people, but he sees nothing wrong with that. In essence, he is advising the White House to abandon yesterday's lies and concentrate on today's. Concede the false claims about weapons of mass destruction, and instead promote what is a brutal colonial occupation aimed at securing US control over strategic oil reserves as a crusade for "democracy" and "pluralism."

Never mind that the majority of the Iraqi people regard the new council in much the same way the Norwegians viewed the Quisling regime set up under Nazi occupation. Some 10,000 Iraqis poured into the streets of Najaf Sunday, confronting US Marines, demanding the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and denouncing the council as a collection of "lackeys." Those participating were overwhelmingly Shiite, making it impossible for the US government and media to attribute the anti-American protest to remnants of the old regime or Baathist conspirators.

Acknowledging the popular hostility to Iraq's "liberators," Friedman responds with a modest proposal for another bloodbath: "These areas need to be reinvaded and then showered with reconstruction funds," he writes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has frequently commented on Friedman, not because his columns marshal intellectual arguments that merit serious debate. Rather, he personifies the corruption of the mass media to the point where it functions as an enthusiastic accomplice in the criminal enterprises of US imperialism.

In the run-up to the Iraq war, Friedman drafted columns that parroted the line of those in the Pentagon's civilian leadership most intimately involved in promoting an invasion. These writings included friendly advice to the administration on how best to create a pretext for war. Answering the cry of

the antiwar protests—“No blood for oil!”—Friedman replied, “Why not?” offering a rationalization for the US seizure of Iraq’s oil reserves.

His specialty, however, is the elaboration of pious appeals to the supposed “better instincts” of the Bush administration, attributing to the gang that controls the White House the task of bringing democracy and prosperity not only to Iraq, but to the whole of the Middle East and the world at large.

There are glaring contradictions raised by this line of argumentation that seem never to occur to Friedman. If the motives of the Bush administration in “liberating” Iraq were so progressive and noble, why was it compelled to invent a phony pretext to sell the war to the American people? How can a government that tramples on democracy at home spread the benefits of democracy to Iraq, or anywhere else?

Underlying Friedman’s contempt for democratic principles is his firm belief that the broad mass of the US population has no business interfering in affairs of state. Such matters are to be left to the corporate and political elite, including its lavishly paid media advisers and apologists, such as Friedman himself.

Friedman undoubtedly thinks of himself as a major “player” in the pursuit of US geopolitical interests. His function is a secondary, but not unimportant, one: poisoning public opinion and inventing alibis for the crimes carried out by those in power. He is one of the more prominent practitioners within a reactionary school of US journalism that has been developing over the course of the past two decades, in tandem with the further consolidation of monopoly corporate control over the American media.

Nurtured on the right-wing politics that dominated Washington under the Reagan administration, these journalists took the path of least resistance, becoming stenographers for those in power, spinning out exclusives attributed to unnamed “senior officials,” and earning the gratitude of these same officials by embellishing upon their lies.

A similar path was taken by Friedman’s fellow senior correspondent at the *Times*, Judith Miller, whose politically incestuous relations with the Pentagon and US intelligence turned her into the main media conduit for unfounded allegations masquerading as news stories concerning Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction.

Rewards follow such journalistic services, in the form of lucrative book deals and well-paid lecture tours in which such writers deliver “expert” opinions that dovetail with US government propaganda. This process has turned Friedman and others like him into members of a wealthy layer of nouveaux riches, whose personal interest in expanding their already considerable wealth provides a narrow, but significant, social base for the predatory US foreign policy of conquest and colonialism.

The American media has always been subservient to the interests of the US ruling class. Nevertheless, it was capable in an earlier period of providing, to some degree, a critical check on the abuse of corporate and government power, and fulfilling its responsibility of examining the claims of presidents and military chiefs. One measure of the decay of the media in general, and the *New York Times* in particular, is the contrast between Friedman’s utter disdain for the truth and the role of the *Times* in publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971. At that time the *Times* proclaimed the pattern of official lies concerning the US intervention in Vietnam to be a political crime of the highest magnitude, justifying the leaking of classified information to the public.

In the writing of Friedman and his ilk, one is dealing not with genuine analysis or even deeply held and seriously considered political beliefs. Rather, one confronts a cynical and ignorant attitude toward history and truth. The arrogant, bullying tone of Friedman’s commentary expresses the egotistical strivings of a corrupt social layer. The fact that he and the *Times* represent the “liberal” wing of bourgeois politics underscores the absence of any constituency within the American ruling elite that is seriously committed to the defense of democratic rights.



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