

# The Times' William Safire: an old Nixon hand covers for Bush's WMD lies

**Alex Lefebvre****5 July 2003**

William Safire's June 2 *New York Times* column, ironically entitled "You Lied to Us," is one of many pieces in the US press seeking to dismiss the fact that the Bush administration lied about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD). Safire, however, is among the more vicious and shameless of Bush's defenders.

Faced with the discrediting of the official justification for the invasion, the *Times* columnist responds with a slander—that those who are demanding an accounting for the administration's lies are defenders, if not accomplices, of Saddam Hussein. They are, in Safire's words, "opponents of this genocidal maniac's removal."

Safire, on the other hand, poses as a man whose every moral fiber is repelled by the repression carried out by the deposed Iraqi strongman. For him, the discovery of mass graves in Iraq renders irrelevant the issue of government lies in support of a war that has cost thousands of lives.

Here contempt for democratic principles merges with the purest cynicism. For those who are familiar with the political history of this eminent scoundrel, however, such dishonest methods come as no surprise. After all, he came to prominence in Republican circles as a leading Nixon administration speechwriter, staying with the administration until 1973.

Safire's support for the most murderous policies of the US ruling elite is nothing new. Under the Nixon administration, Safire was complicit in immense crimes against the peoples of Southeast Asia and of the US itself. This period saw the secret and illegal invasion of Cambodia, the massacre of Kent State University students protesting this invasion, the 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi, the Watergate scandal and cover-up—which ultimately brought down the Nixon administration—and its long list of illegal wiretaps and "dirty tricks."

Safire's role was to justify and cover up these policies. In his account of the Nixon administration, a 1975 book titled *Before the Fall*, Safire defends the 1970 decision by

the Nixon administration to bomb and invade Cambodia without informing the American people—he claims he personally drafted replies to opponents of the move, and blandly describes it a "useful cause." After the Kent State University shootings, Safire stayed on with the Nixon administration for three more years (he left when he learned that Nixon had had his phone tapped on suspicions that Safire was too close to certain members of the press that Nixon distrusted).

The long list of despots Nixon collaborated with internationally exposes Safire's phony pose of moral revulsion towards Saddam Hussein. Safire was with the Nixon administration as it was planning the military coup that brought Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet to power, overthrowing the democratically elected regime of leftist Salvador Allende. Safire was also a close personal friend of Henry Kissinger, the architect of the coup.

The Nixon administration also entertained direct and friendly relations with the Brazilian military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. In the 1970s, following what was then called the "Nixon doctrine," it used Brazil as a "surrogate regional power" to suppress social protests and armed rebellions in nearby Uruguay. Recently declassified documents at the National Security Archive show that in November 1971—while Safire was still with the Nixon administration—Nixon commented to then-British Prime Minister Edward Heath: "Brazil helped rig the Uruguayan elections."

At the time, the US government also had friendly relations with the bloodstained Suharto regime in Indonesia, fresh from its 1966 CIA-assisted massacre of hundreds of thousands of Indonesian Communists, the fascist Franco regime in Spain, and the Shah of Iran. In his June 19 *New York Times* editorial, Safire recalls with amusement his personal conversations with the Shah of Iran, who kept a shopping district of Teheran open late into the night so that Safire could shop for antiques.

Safire, a longtime hard-line Zionist, has consistently backed the Israeli state's repressive measures against the Palestinian people, branding Yasser Arafat and any popular Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation as "terrorism."

*Before the Fall* contains several revealing passages concerning Safire's attitude toward the relationship between the press and the government. He views governmental manipulation of the media, and media subservience to it, as the norm. In a typical passage, he writes, "many [journalists] angrily blamed [Nixon Press Secretary Ron Ziegler] for the lack of news or the manipulation of the news, often forgetting that his role was to be more the President's press secretary than the press' representative to the President."

After leaving the Nixon administration in 1973, Safire joined the editorial staff of the *New York Times*. He functioned as an operative for the then-right wing of the Republican Party, carrying out journalistic exposures trying to weaken the Democratic Party's hold on Congress and weaken the Carter administration. When he won the 1978 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary, the award cited his work against the Carter administration.

Safire was also a key figure in the *New York Times*'s participation in the Republican right's campaign to unseat the Clinton administration in the 1990s, helping publicize Kathleen Willey's allegations that Clinton had sexually harassed her.

His role after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks has been to support the government and agitate for war with Iraq in the most aggressive and unilateralist fashion. In his September 24, 2001 *New York Times* editorial, he wrote: "'We're looking for links' between Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorist group and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, said Colin Powell yesterday. So far, our secretary of state can see 'no clear link' between bin Laden's forces in Afghanistan and the America-hater publicly laughing at our grief in Baghdad.

"Powell does not want to acknowledge any evidence of sponsorship of bin Laden by Iraq because that would demand a crushing blow at an Arab state. It might limit the diplomatic convoy of consensus he is assembling, which will travel at the rate of its most grudging member."

This editorial was the first of many in which he made unsubstantiated claims of links between Hussein and the Al Qaeda terrorist network, supposedly arising from their joint financing of armed Kurdish terrorist groups in

northern Iraq. However, to this day, nearly two years later, no one has presented any credible evidence of links between Hussein's secular regime and the violently fundamentalist Al Qaeda.

Safire's reaction to the September 11 attacks themselves was quite revealing, showing both his awareness of the Bush administration's deceptiveness and, despite this, his strong support for a US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

In the days after the attacks, presidential adviser Karl Rove covered for President Bush's panicked reaction on September 11, claiming that the Secret Service had "specific and credible" evidence that terrorists were targeting the president's plane, Air Force One, and had specific information about its travel procedures. Safire spoke for sections of the US ruling elite concerned at the image of disarray that Bush's actions gave the world on September 11. In his September 13, 2001 editorial he claimed that the official Bush administration story suggested that the terrorists had contacts within the US intelligence community or Secret Service.

Two weeks later the White House reversed itself, denying that the Secret Service had ever received evidence suggesting that terrorists were targeting Air Force One.

Safire is well aware that the Bush administration has no compunction about lying to the people in order to achieve its goals, as the current occupation of Iraq has shown. However, for Safire—today, just as during the Nixon administration—the truth takes a back seat to the economic and geopolitical interests of corporate America.



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