

The New York Times whitewashes Bush's lies on Iraq war

Bill Vann

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In what amounts to a damning self-indictment, the *New York Times* admitted in a September 26 editorial that it "never quarreled with one of [the Bush administration's] basic premises" for launching its war on Iraq—the supposed threat from weapons of mass destruction.

The editorial, titled "The failure to find Iraqi weapons," never explains, however, why the newspaper—considered the most influential voice of what once passed for a liberal establishment in America—uncritically accepted the government's premises.

The obvious question is why the *Times*, with its hundreds of reporters and annual revenues totaling over \$3 billion, did not question the Bush administration's official story. Why did it not use its considerable resources to conduct its own independent investigation and challenge the claims of the government? Is that not the supposed task of an independent media?

The *Times* did no such thing. On the contrary, it served as a willing conduit for the administration's war propaganda. More than that, through its senior correspondent, Judith Miller, it collaborated in manufacturing false intelligence as a pretext for war. Miller published story after story alleging the existence of Iraqi WMD, which she later acknowledged were based on "exclusive" information provided by Ahmed Chalabi, the convicted bank embezzler who heads the Iraqi National Congress. Chalabi was universally viewed within intelligence circles as an unreliable source, given that his motive was to provoke a US invasion.

Now it has become undeniably obvious that the Bush administration's allegations about Iraqi weapons were fraudulent. After a six-month search of Iraq, a draft report from a 1,400-member US-led team revealed that it has turned up not a trace of the hundreds of tons of chemical and biological weapons that the administration claimed were in the hands of the Iraqi regime.

As the pretext given for the Iraq war crumbles, the *Times* has published what amounts to a "preemptive" editorial. Its aim is to forestall any serious political conclusions about the fact that the government carried out an unprovoked war of aggression based upon lies.

"Now it appears that premise was wrong," the newspaper declares. "We cannot in hindsight blame the administration for its original conclusions. They were based on the best intelligence available."

This statement was made just days before the release of a letter

from the leadership of the House Intelligence Committee, headed by Florida Republican and former CIA agent Congressman Porter Goss. It described this "best intelligence" as "piecemeal," "fragmentary" and "circumstantial." For the most part, it added, the claims were based on estimates made a decade earlier.

"The absence of proof that chemical and biological weapons and their related development programs had been destroyed was considered proof that they continued to exist," the letter, addressed to CIA Director George Tenet, stated. "The assessment that Iraq continued to pursue chemical and biological weapons remained constant and static over the past 10 years."

The letter went on to charge that the government and the intelligence agencies observed a "low threshold" or "no threshold" in disseminating bogus claims that the regime in Baghdad was tied to terrorism.

"As a result, intelligence reports that might have been screened out by a more vigorous vetting process made their way to the analysts' desks, providing ample room for vagary to intrude," the letter stated. This included reports from sources "that would otherwise be dismissed," it added.

This assessment echoed that of Hans Blix, the chief United Nations weapons inspector, who earlier this month stated his conclusion that the Iraqi regime had destroyed all of its chemical and biological weapons in 1991.

Blix compared the Bush administration's efforts to prove otherwise to the witch-hunters of the Middle Ages. "In the Middle Ages when people were convinced there were witches they certainly found them," he said, accusing the Bush administration and the Blair government in Britain of carrying out the "spin and hyping" of phony intelligence concerning alleged Iraqi weapons.

Senator Edward Kennedy, one of the most senior Democrats on Capitol Hill and the brother of an assassinated president, went further, declaring that the pretext for war was a "fraud," based on "distortion, misrepresentation, a selection of intelligence." He charged that the Bush administration launched the invasion to secure domestic political advantage. "There was no imminent threat," Kennedy said. "This was made up in Texas, announced in January to the Republican leadership that war was going to take place and was going to be good politically."

Meanwhile in Britain, the Hutton Inquiry into the suicide of weapons expert David Kelly has established beyond any reasonable doubt that Bush's sole major international ally systematically lied and distorted intelligence to promote a war on

Iraq.

Yet the *Times* insists that its readers assume only innocent motives and good intentions on the part of the Bush White House. While faulting the administration for its doctrine of preemptive war and suggesting that the absence of any weapons in Iraq is “an uncomfortable question for the Bush administration,” the newspaper nonetheless suggests that all can end well: “If Iraq can be turned into a freer and happier country in coming years, it could become a focal point for the evolution of a more peaceful and democratic Middle East.”

Two days after the editorial appeared, the *Times* published a piece by its foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman. While using the bully-boy language and cynical realpolitik arguments that are his trademark, his column essentially served the same purpose: to gloss over the vast implications of the US government having lied to the American people to provoke a war.

Citing the interim report indicating no trace of WMD in Iraq, Friedman writes: “What this means for the American people is this: The war to oust Saddam Hussein was always a war of choice (a good choice, I believe). But democracies don’t like to fight wars of choice.... Knowing this, the Bush team tried to turn Iraq into a war of necessity by hyping the threat Saddam may have posed with WMD.”

What are the implications of Friedman’s argument that “Democracies don’t like to fight wars of choice”? Such wars, commonly referred to as “wars of aggression,” have previously been associated with fascist dictatorships, particularly Nazi Germany. It was the launching of such wars that formed the basis of the principal charge laid against the surviving leaders of the Third Reich during the war crimes trials at Nuremberg.

To convince the American people that it was not waging such a criminal war, the administration invented a threat where none existed. It lied and has continued to lie.

These lies are not, it should be added, about minor policies, let alone about the private sex life of a president, the grounds less than five years ago for the impeachment of Clinton.

The lies about Iraqi weapons involved the most momentous decision a US president can make—to send the country’s military to war. Bush carried out the Iraqi invasion based upon a Congressional resolution stating that military action was justified in “self defense” against a supposed threat that Iraq would use biological or chemical weapons to carry out a “surprise attack” on the US. No such weapons existed and the administration deliberately falsified intelligence reports to claim that they did.

The result has been the loss of tens of thousands of Iraqi lives. Over 310 US soldiers have been killed and more than 1,600 wounded. The cost of this military intervention has skyrocketed to over \$166 billion for the first year alone. The implications of this vast expenditure will be felt by millions of Americans in the form of even deeper cuts in health care, education and vital social programs, cuts that will undoubtedly lead to the deaths of innocent people in the US as well.

Exemplifying the corruption and outright criminality of the US media, Friedman’s response is: too bad. He could care less about the soldiers who are being killed and maimed on a daily basis in Iraq or that they were sent there on false pretenses. “Sorry folks,

we broke it, we own it,” he writes, demanding that the Democrats choose between “wallowing in the mess, endlessly criticizing how we got into Iraq, or articulating a broader more realistic vision for successful nation-building there.”

Is there no connection between “how we got into Iraq”—based on systematic lying to both the American people and the world—and the debacle that now confronts the US administration’s attempt at “nation-building”? This term is a euphemism for colonial conquest. Its objective in Iraq is the securing of US control over the Persian Gulf and its vast oil reserves in order to promote Washington’s goal of undisputed global hegemony. That this fact is understood by the Iraqis is reflected in a growing guerrilla war of resistance to the US-led occupation.

The Bush administration utilized criminal means to pursue criminal ends. As a result Iraqis died and American youth were sent to their deaths based upon a lie. The attempt to dismiss this by the *Times* and its thuggish international columnist makes them accomplices.

These issues cannot be swept aside. At stake are the democratic rights of the American people, not to mention the threat that those who hold power in Washington will continue with their “wars of choice” until they escalate into a worldwide conflagration.

It is clear that Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and every other principal figure in the administration lied in order to promote a war of aggression. They must be held accountable.

What is called for is a full and independent investigation into the way in which the illegal war against Iraq was prepared. Those responsible must be punished. All those government officials who launched this war on false pretenses must be impeached and criminally prosecuted.

As the role of the *New York Times* clearly demonstrates, a similar investigation is needed into the role of the mass media in serving as a willing propaganda arm for US militarism.

The fight to bring those responsible for the war to account must be joined with the demand for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.



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