

An exchange on “Friedman of the Times declares war on France”

24 November 2003

To the Editor,

Bill Vann’s piece about *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman raises an issue that troubles me deeply, and I feel it is one the *World Socialist Web Site* should address.

The piece was entitled “Friedman of the *Times* declares war on France,” [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/sep2003/frie-s20.shtml>] published on September 20. A recent selection of letters in response to the piece, Letters on “Friedman of the *Times* declares war on France”, [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/sep2003/corr-s23.shtml>] published three days later, did not raise the issue that I hope the WSWS editors, or perhaps Vann himself, will take time to clarify.

The subject of Vann’s article is a recent Friedman column in which the *Times* columnist rants (again) about France. The piece concludes with the following paragraph:

“It is imperative that those responsible for the war on Iraq, and for the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis and hundreds of Americans, be held accountable through investigations, impeachment proceedings and criminal prosecution. This includes the well-paid hacks like Friedman who deliberately lied to the American people to promote this war.”

As an opponent of the Bush administration, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as one who has rejected the politics and policies of the Democratic Party and Greens in favor of a socialist perspective and program grounded in the principles espoused by the Socialist Equality Party, I must ask:

Does the SEP endorse the “investigation” and “criminal prosecution” of journalists? If so, who? What are the criteria, and what is the legal basis for such action?

There is no question that George Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Condoleezza Rice—to cite only the first tier of administration scoundrels—are worthy candidates for a war crimes tribunal. They are, in my mind, liars and criminals in the literal sense of the word and should be prosecuted for the bloodshed and devastation they have unleashed upon innocent people in some of the poorest regions of the world.

I must add that I have enjoyed and found myself in general agreement with the body of Vann’s other work, including his occasional analysis of Friedman and his reactionary diatribes. As a professional writer, I have to say it would be worth winning a Pulitzer Prize for no other reason than to reject it on the grounds that the award has been given to the likes of Friedman not once, but three times.

To the extent that a precedent for such a “prosecution” exists, one was discussed in some detail in a piece by David Walsh last spring [“The Nuremberg tribunal and the role of the media,” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/apr2003/nure-a16.shtml>], which I have reviewed since reading Vann’s September 20 article on Friedman. The article on Nuremberg focused on the American

prosecution’s case against Hans Fritzsche, who is described in Walsh’s article as “one of the individuals chiefly responsible for Nazi newspaper and radio propaganda.”

Fritzsche, according to this article, was named head of the German Press Division in 1938. He eventually became a section chief in Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry. In other words, he was a member of a political administration that was crafting and implementing a criminal policy, paid by the government to say and do certain things. This distinction, in my mind, is an important one...

In calling for Friedman’s head, Vann does not make this distinction. While one might persuasively argue that former White House spokesman Ari Fleisher served the same propagandist function as Fritzsche and perhaps belongs “in the dock” with Bush and the rest, I believe that no journalist working in a free society, given the literal meaning and practical application of the First Amendment, should have to worry that he or she will be “investigated” and “prosecuted” for what they write, regardless of how banal, reactionary, ridiculous or offensive their commentary is...

Vann also accuses Friedman of having “deliberately lied to the American people to promote this war.”... Since I have not read every column Friedman has written and subjected the statements in each to a rigorous examination alongside the facts and data that were available at the time Friedman sat down at his word processor—including those the writer may have obtained from sources he did not identify or refer to—and including those that have come to light since, who is to say whether Friedman is a liar or simply an idiot?

The implications of Vann’s explicit call for prosecuting writers for what they write hardly need to be expounded upon. If Vann is willing to lower the legal bar established by Nuremberg to include “well-paid” writers who aren’t employed by the government, is it outside the realm of possibility that his dragnet might also encompass right-wing columnists from smaller newspapers who mindlessly regurgitate swill from the national media but nevertheless have a commensurate influence on public opinion in their own communities? How about those who have written pro-Bush letters to their local newspapers?

I regard your web site as something of a beacon on the Internet—an absolutely vital source for news and analysis from a perspective that cannot be found anywhere else, at a time when it is desperately needed.

The value of the analysis that one finds here lies precisely in the fact that it is consistently thoughtful, intellectually serious and considered—and that one typically does not encounter shallow sloganeering or ideological chest-beating and hyperbole.

Vann’s remark about Friedman, in the best scenario, strikes me as possibly a rare example of the latter—a case of a writer popping off in a moment of justified passion about a reactionary buffoon who, in today’s stagnant intellectual climate, is regarded by some as

“respectable”...

Sincerely,

DB

Dear DB:

I understand your concerns about journalism and freedom of expression. Certainly we do not support a proposal that all those who have written anything supporting the Bush administration should be subjected to criminal prosecution. We do believe, however, that the role played by key media outlets and national “opinion makers” in selling a war to the public on patently false pretenses merits a serious investigation.

You ask if there is any precedent for trying journalists for what they have written, and there indeed is one, also from the Nuremberg war crime trials. The relevant case was not that of Fritzche, but of Julius Streicher. While a Nazi party member since 1921, he held no state position and, as the indictment itself spells out: “There is no evidence that he was ever within Hitler’s inner circle of advisers, nor during his career was he closely connected with the formulation of policies that led to war...”

Yet, the tribunal found that Streicher’s writings in the anti-Semitic weekly *Der Sturmer* and later in a daily, *Frankische Tageszeitung*, advocating war and genocide made him just as guilty if not more so than many of the defendants who were directly involved in Nazi war crimes.

The WWSWS published an article at the outset of the war on Iraq—“Media lies and war crimes: the instructive case of Julius Streicher”, [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/mar2003/stre-m25.shtml>]

—that concluded: “The American media has worked as an essential instrument of the Bush administration in deceiving and terrorizing the American people in preparation for war. In many cases—Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages and countless barking commentators on both network and cable talk shows—they have approached the degraded level of *Der Sturmer* in promoting an invasion of Iraq and justifying mass murder.... How and when those who are responsible for this war of aggression will be made to pay for their crimes remains to be seen. But there can be no doubt there are many candidates to fill the place in the dock that was occupied by Streicher at Nuremberg.”

Do you disagree with this formulation? Individual soldiers—of course not very many of them—are facing charges now for acts of brutality committed against Iraqi prisoners. Are they more culpable than those who poisoned the public consciousness and, yes, deliberately lied to the American people about the supposed threat posed by Iraq, terrorist ties, etc., thereby paving the way to this brutality?

I believe if one takes the body of Friedman’s work, innocent explanations, including stupidity, are not credible. He has written one column after another promoting the US aggression in Iraq, never bothering himself that his latest justification contradicts the previous ones.

But, let’s take another example, his colleague at the *Times*, Judith Miller. Here is someone who, under journalistic cover, pursued a political agenda that corresponds directly to that of the Washington group that planned and executed the war. She made herself a conduit for false intelligence from Ahmed Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress concerning weapons of mass destruction—propaganda that then was picked up as hard news by media outlets throughout the country making the case to the public for war. And—according to credible press accounts—she ended up practically running one of the military units

sent into Iraq to hunt for WMDs. Are we to believe that the First Amendment protects such activities?

The First Amendment that you cite is supposed to embody freedom of expression and protect written opinion and public speech against state interference and suppression. These are principles that the socialist movement defends. We have repeatedly opposed attempts to suppress even right-wing speech and publications arguing that any such actions would only create the precedent for the state turning far more brutally against its working class and socialist opponents.

It has become increasingly clear, however, that the greatest immediate threat to free expression and the right of the public to objective information in the US is not government suppression, but the corporate stranglehold over the mass media, summed up in the control of the broadcast networks by a set of four giant corporations—General Electric, Viacom, Disney and the Murdoch’s News Corporation. Print journalism has itself been increasingly consolidated in the hands of a few major national newspaper conglomerates. What little independence the so-called “Fourth Estate” previously had from the government and the corporations has increasingly vanished.

We are not demanding that the Bush administration or the US Justice Department investigate and prosecute Friedman—a decidedly unlikely scenario—or anybody else. What we have repeatedly suggested is that an independent investigation into how this criminal war was foisted upon the American people should be organized as part of the struggle to mobilize the working class against the war and for the transformation of the social system responsible for it.

Should such an investigation establish that media executives and even prominent national columnists were directly complicit with the Bush administration in advocating this war and in deceiving the American people, I think that the precedent of Julius Streicher at Nuremberg would apply.

Best regards,

Bill Vann, for the WWSWS



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact