

Bush on “Meet the Press”: a letter on the US media

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The author of the letter below is a contributor to the World Socialist Web Site.

To the Editor, I would like to thank Bill Van Auken for his fine piece on the “intellectual and moral cipher” that was on display during the excruciating hour of NBC’s “Meet the Press” on February 7. [See “SEP presidential candidate on Bush’s ‘Meet the Press’ interview: ‘A spectacle of ignorance, cynicism and indifference’”] Assuming that George W. Bush’s political handlers are smarter than he is, it’s amazing that they permit him to participate in such forums.

I’d like to add a few remarks, if I may, on another aspect of this important interview: Tim Russert, the man who conducted it.

As a long-time student of communications and the press, I feel justified in saying that Russert’s performance was a disgrace. Having watched the program and read the transcript, I am frankly embarrassed for him. The interview amounted to little more an hour-long advertisement for the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of the corporate media. Years from now, one can hope that this Oval Office exchange is studied by serious students of journalism as an example of how to blow an interview.

Russert’s reputation as a merciless interviewer with a crack research team casts Sunday’s incident in an even worse, and arguably ominous, light.

Nothing that transpired during the interview suggested that any serious effort was made to extract the most damning contradictions between the Bush administration’s war rhetoric and objective reality on the ground as the basis for a line of legitimate questioning.

And, if in fact this preparatory work was done, one must ask: Why did Russert fail to ask about them? Why, when it came to the all-important skill of the “gotcha” follow-up, did he stand down?

I will not recount here every possible question that could and should have been asked. This has been done elsewhere, both before and since the interview took place. *Nation* columnist David Corn had some good ones in his column a few days ago, and the trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*—hardly a bastion of liberal political thought—carried a column by Greg Mitchell featuring “10 Questions Russert Didn’t Ask.” More readers suggested additional questions in a discussion thread that accompanied the online version of Mitchell’s column, at <http://www.editorandpublisher.com/>.

It is rare, frankly, for media complicity in the manufacturing of consent to be so evident—and so apparently deliberate—in a single piece of reporting. The bottom line that emerged from Russert’s “interview” is that Bush can rest assured that he will not be challenged in any serious way by the mainstream press. Meanwhile, the best we can hope for is a distracting and ultimately useless debate over whether the pre-war intelligence from Iraq was “good” or “bad.” This, of course, is precisely how Bush wants the issue framed if it must be discussed at all.

Bush, for his part, looked so genuinely uncomfortable during the proceedings that one must assume that had Russert come out like a heavyweight champion instead of a featherweight with the flu, we might have had a more profound “teachable moment” in the nation’s political life—maybe the spectacle of an American president completely breaking down on TV and being physically hauled away by Karl Rove, followed by awkward dead air.

The “Meet the Press” interview stands not just as an indictment of Bush, but an indictment of the entire media establishment. One gets the uneasy sense that these guys know Bush is a monumental fraud and a liar, and that they are terrified of acknowledging this, of

confronting and seriously challenging him and his policies.

Which begs another question: What is it, precisely, about *this* particular administration, at this time in history, that so frightens the “independent” press?

Sincerely yours,

Noah Page



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