

Britain: Sacking of Mirror editor over Iraq abuse photos—a major attack on press freedom

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The sacking of *Daily Mirror* editor Piers Morgan on May 14 is a victory for a government-led campaign to silence all criticism of the brutal occupation of Iraq.

The *Mirror* is one of only two British newspapers that has consistently opposed the war against Iraq and been somewhat critical of the ongoing occupation. Silencing its revelations of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by the British army was essential for the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, at a time when it faces growing difficulties at home and abroad.

Given that the accounts of beatings, torture and murder made to the *Mirror* by several unidentified soldiers cannot be contested, the government focussed its attentions on the insistence that photographs of the abuse were fakes.

Until last week this campaign had proved unsuccessful. Though there were questions as to the authenticity of the photographs, there was no doubt they had been given to the *Mirror* by the soldiers concerned who had insisted that they were participants in the abuses documented. And even the staunchest critics of the *Mirror* noted the possibility that they were contemporaneous reproductions of the actual events, possibly staged by investigators as opposed to fakes made for the purpose of monetary gain.

Morgan, despite acknowledging the possibility that the pictures were not authentic, stood by his decision to publish and correctly insisted that the government had not proven the photographs to be fake. He could not only rely on the testimony of a number of soldiers, but earlier reports of abuses in the *Independent* and even the pro-war *Sun* newspapers, as well as reports by Amnesty International and the International Red Cross of the systematic abuse of prisoners involving the British army. The Queen's Lancashire Regiment, whose soldiers were alleged to have carried out the abuses photographed, was facing a charge of having murdered an Iraqi detainee.

In any event, the context of Morgan's decision to publish argued strongly for doing so. The photographs were given to the *Mirror* at a time when literally hundreds of undeniably genuine photos of abuses by US troops, had come to light.

But the Ministry of Defence launched an investigation into the *Mirror's* account with the sole purpose of discrediting the photos. In contrast to months of inactivity with regard to the actual abuses, more than 25 investigators were set to work to find out whom in the QLR had made the leaks to the *Mirror*, and to find evidence

proving that the truck in the photographs had never been to Iraq.

In the end, it was not even possible for the government to wait for the publication of this report. As one Labour MP explained, ministers knew that charges against British soldiers, including members of the QLR, for abusing Iraqi civilians were imminent. Therefore, "If Morgan had hung on until the charges he would have claimed vindication even if his pictures were shown to be fakes. We couldn't let that happen."

To avoid this outcome a statement was issued alleging that forensic investigations had found the truck depicted by identifying scratches and other markings, and that it had never been to Iraq. A number of government spokesmen, including Blair, began issuing public statements insisting that the photos were a hoax.

Even so, until the very last Morgan was standing by his decision to publish the photographs and insisting that it was wrongdoing by the government and the armed forces that was the central issue. On the evening of May 13, *Mirror* informant soldier C told ITV's *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* that Iraqi prisoners "were beaten for fun. I saw them in those sand bags for hours and hours on end. And then water would be poured over them. I know that some of them had trouble breathing."

But at midday on May 14, the QLR convened a press conference, demanding an apology from the *Mirror* and that action be taken against Morgan. Just hours later, Morgan was sacked and escorted off the premises by security guards.

Morgan's sacking has served to confirm the absence of anything that could remotely be described as a "free" and "independent" media.

In the first instance the government is no longer prepared to tolerate any independent scrutiny of its policies and actions. Such is the degree to which it acts against the wishes and basic interests of the mass of the population and in the service of a wealthy elite that suppression and censorship are the order of the day.

It is remarkable that, faced with the exposure of a systematic campaign of lies and misinformation used to justify support for an illegal war of aggression against Iraq focussing on claims that it possessed an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, the government's defence was that it had acted in good faith on what turned out to be poor intelligence. No government minister resigned and none was held accountable.

In contrast, BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan was hounded out of

his job on the basis of a wrongly attributed comment that the government had “sexed up” the now widely discredited intelligence dossiers used to justify support for war. No one could deny that Gilligan had correctly reported the substance of comments by whistleblower Dr. David Kelly noting widespread unease within the intelligence services over the government’s propaganda. Yet the conclusion of the inquiry into Kelly’s death by Lord Hutton exonerated the government and turned all criticism against Gilligan and the BBC for the supposed crime of reporting a story of major public interest. Not only was Gilligan forced out, but he was joined by BBC Director General Greg Dyke and Chairman Gavyn Davies.

Once again the government has succeeded in turning revelations of wrongdoing by the army and its own silence on these issues into a campaign to discredit its critics. Unable to disprove an unpalatable message, the messenger has been shot.

None of this could have been achieved without the active collaboration of both the *Mirror*’s owners, Trinity Mirror, and the vast bulk of the press.

A key role was played by a number of prominent US corporations with shares in Trinity who were opposed to the *Mirror*’s antiwar stance long before the publication of the photos. These included Fidelity and Tweedy, Browne, which collectively own 20 percent of Trinity’s stock. In an unprecedented decision, other shareholders such as First Isis Asset Management, a fund management company that owns almost 4 percent of stock, and Deutsche Asset Management spoke out publicly to question the *Mirror*’s editorial integrity.

There were already calls from these prominent Trinity shareholders for the corporation to sell the *Mirror*, the *People*, the *Sunday Mirror* and their Scottish counterparts.

One indication of the extent to which corporate investors are ready and able to dictate the editorial direction of newspapers under their control is the policy of the German company Axel Springer—currently bidding for control of the *Daily Telegraph*. It demands that its journalists sign a pledge to promote the free market, the existence of Israel, the transatlantic alliance and the unification of Europe.

Also working to the government’s advantage, the editorial staff of many newspapers and their high-profile commentators were fully prepared to join in the witch-hunt of Piers Morgan. These included not only the more obvious culprits such as Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun*, but also the *Guardian*—whose liberal pretensions were again sidelined in favour of their determined support for the Blair government.

Just how far the *Guardian* is prepared to see such attacks on democratic press freedoms to be extended was manifested in a comment piece by Martin Kettle on May 18.

Railing against “journalists’ self-righteous arrogance,” Kettle said the case against Morgan was “open and shut.” He continued that the *Mirror*’s “faked tale was not some one off event.” It was symptomatic of a press that was out of control.

The power of the media has to be curbed, Kettle insisted, before drawing a parallel with the attacks on trade unions carried out by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. He declared, “Forty years ago, there was another irresponsible

power in the land, one that also considered itself outside the rules that others made and obeyed.”

The trade unions “most powerful leaders—rightly dubbed barons—often behaved as if they had no responsibility for the condition of the country beyond the gratification of their own self interest. It took many decades for the trade unions to be brought within the boundaries of civil society and the law. It had to be done.”

Given that the curbing of “union power” that Kettle endorses took place through the enforcing of a series of anti-democratic laws and by a mass mobilisation of the state to suppress opposition from the working class, one can only assume the worst when considering what levels of censorship the *Guardian* will portray as legitimate in order to defend the government from criticism. And covering the government’s back is what is at stake here, for no other calumny perpetrated by the media against working people—including the daily witch-hunting of asylum-seekers—has so enraged Kettle.

Even now the attack on democratic freedoms continues to gather pace. In order to discredit Morgan’s exclusive, the 500-plus members of the QLR are being subject to unprecedented invasions of their privacy. At least one soldier is currently being detained, suspected of being a *Mirror* source, after an investigation by a team of military police during which the entire regiment was apparently confined to barracks while on duty in Cyprus. All soldiers have been instructed to hand over any photos taken while on duty in Iraq.

A report in the *Independent on Sunday* summarised a text message sent home by one soldier that said, “what a naughty regiment we are! confined to barracks. Two lads sent back to Colchester for trying to get a drink. Whole regiment threatened with being disbanded.”

Another QLR soldier sent a message reading, “Phew. I’m out of Cyprus. They looked up my a—e and down my p— hole before they left me go.”

Once again, the sole concern of the government and the armed forces is not to end abuses, but to prevent evidence of such abuses being disclosed.



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