

The New York Times and the Bush “disaster”

Joseph Kay, Barry Grey
25 October 2004

On October 17, the *New York Times* published its endorsement of Democrat John Kerry for president. The editorial’s main argument was that Bush had implemented a radical right agenda that undermined long-standing democratic processes at home and produced a foreign policy debacle in Iraq.

According to the *Times*, the presidential race “is mainly about Mr. Bush’s disastrous tenure.” The editors began their litany of Bush’s misdeeds by noting that “the Supreme Court awarded him the presidency.” This was a deliberate reminder of the illegitimate—from the standpoint of constitutional and democratic principles—pedigree of the administration.

This led to the newspaper’s first point in its political indictment: that Bush, who had lost the popular vote to Democrat Al Gore, “turned the government over to the radical right” and pursued a far-right agenda for which it had no popular mandate. The *Times* cited as prima facie evidence of this reckless course Bush’s appointment of John Ashcroft as attorney general.

Once in office, Bush “moved quickly to implement a far-reaching anti-choice agenda.” He “remained fixated on...fighting the right wing’s war against taxing the wealthy” and pursued “a systematic weakening of regulatory safeguards” on the environment.

The administration’s policy was characterized by “a Nixonian obsession with secrecy, disrespect for civil liberties and inept management...The Justice Department became a cheerleader for skirting decades-old international laws and treaties forbidding the brutal treatment of prisoners taken during wartime.”

The war in Iraq was launched on the basis of “misrepresentations,” including the two pieces of bogus evidence that Saddam Hussein was pursuing nuclear weapons. One [the allegation of Iraqi attempts to purchase uranium from Niger] was “the product of rumor and forgery,” while the other [the charge that aluminum tubes were procured to develop nuclear weapons] “had been thoroughly debunked by administration investigators.”

Taken on their face, the *Times*’ charges—all

irrefutable—present a picture of an administration that functions as a criminal conspiracy, using secrecy and lies to undermine democratic rights, further enrich the most privileged social layers, and launch wars on false pretenses.

What the *Times* does not address is the most important question: how has such a government been allowed to carry through its radical agenda? There is a good reason for the newspaper’s silence on this matter—its own complicity.

On the eve of the 2004 election, the *Times* finds it expedient to remind us of the 2000 election crisis and its undemocratic resolution, implicitly placing a question mark on the legitimacy of the Bush administration. It has, however, remained remarkably silent on this critical political fact for four years.

At the time of Bush’s installation by the right-wing Supreme Court majority, which halted the counting of votes in Florida to ensure the accession of the Republican candidate, the *Times* was not so reticent. On the contrary, it endorsed the ruling and opposed any questioning of the legitimacy of the new administration.

In an editorial published December 13, 2000, one day after the Supreme Court ruling, it urged the American people to “respect the authority of the ruling and the legitimacy of the new presidency whether or not they agree with the court’s legal reasoning...Mr. Bush’s title to the office comes through the electoral count and through appropriate legal procedures that settled in his favor the official result of a messy Florida election.”

This set the tone for the next four years. During the first nine months of the administration, the newspaper sought to minimize the far-reaching character of Bush’s right-wing agenda, while going to great lengths to portray the semi-literate front-man for the most reactionary sections of the American ruling elite in the best possible light.

Two weeks into the Bush presidency, for example, the *Times* downplayed the significance of Ashcroft’s nomination as the country’s chief law enforcement official. In a February 2, 2001 editorial, the newspaper

noted: “Mr. Ashcroft pledged at his [confirmation] hearings not to let his views interfere with his sworn duty to uphold the law and run the department in an unbiased way.” The editorial went on to express the hope that he would keep his word.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the newspaper intensified its efforts to boost Bush’s public image (and politically disarm the American people), at times going to absurd lengths to promote the myth of Bush as a mature and sober leader.

There was, for example, the October 12, 2001 editorial that followed one of Bush’s rare press conferences. At the news conference, held to outline the rationale for the war launched a few days before against Afghanistan, Bush gave a typically incoherent performance, riddled with contradictions and lies. The basic content, however, was ominously clear: Bush declared the attack on Afghanistan “the first battle in the war of the twenty-first century.”

Here is what the *Times* had to say in its editorial, headlined “Mr. Bush’s New Gravitas.” The president, the *Times* wrote, “seemed confident, determined, sure of his purpose and in full command of the complex array of political and military challenges that he faces in the wake of the terrible terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. It was a reassuring performance that should give comfort to an uneasy nation...[Bush] seemed to be a president whom the nation could follow in these difficult times...He was at once firm in his resolve to protect the nation and fatherly in his calm advice to get on with the life of the country as much as people can.”

The *Times*, of course, knew better. This was the same George Bush whom it now denounces as a liar and incompetent. But the newspaper, which fully supported the “war on terror” and its first installment, the invasion of Afghanistan, was not about to level with the American people, any more than the administration it was covering up for.

One could cite many more editorial testimonials for Bush, including pieces supporting Homeland Security terror alerts issued without any substantiation, and commentaries inveighing against “partisan” exploitation of Bush’s long-standing ties to Enron boss Kenneth Lay. Meanwhile, on its news pages, the newspaper systematically promoted the lies that were used to justify the invasion of Iraq. (See “The *New York Times* and the road to war”.)

This policy of concealment and cover-up has continued up to the present. When *Newsweek* reported this summer that the administration was developing contingency plans

to cancel the elections in the event of a terrorist attack, the *Times* first ignored and then dismissed (in a July 17 editorial) the enormous threat to democratic rights that these plans represented.

In light of this record, the *Times*’ October 17 indictment of the Bush administration constitutes a self-indictment—one that extends to the Democratic Party and the entire “liberal” establishment.

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