

The New York Times and the road to war

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On October 3, the *New York Times* published an extensive article detailing the history of one of the fabrications employed by the American government to justify the war against Iraq: the charge that aluminum tubes imported by Saddam Hussein were intended for use in the development of a nuclear weapons program.

The article (“How the White House Embraced Disputed Arms Intelligence,” by David Barstow, William Broad and Jeff Gerth) is an indictment of the Bush administration. But the information it presents is also a political indictment of the role played by the *Times* itself in facilitating the drive to war.

This, of course, was not the intention of the newspaper’s publisher and editors. On the contrary, the publication of the article was, in large measure, motivated by a desire to present the *Times* as a conscientious critic of the war. Hence the follow-up editorial that appeared on October 5, in which the editors struck a pose of shock and dismay over the findings outlined in their October 3 article.

“The more we learn about the way Mr. Bush paved the road to war,” the editorial declared, “the more it becomes disturbingly clear that if he was not aware that he was feeding misinformation to the world, he was the only one in his circle who was not clued in.”

The editorial went on to say that administration officials “had plenty of evidence that the [aluminum tubes] claim was baseless; it was a long-discounted theory that had to be resurrected from the intelligence community’s wastebasket when the administration needed justification for invading Iraq.”

The editorial failed to note the salient fact—which emerges clearly from the *Times*’ own account published two days before—that the newspaper played an indispensable role in “feeding misinformation to the world.” As the October 3 article revealed, the *Times* served as a conduit for administration officials, uncritically reporting their claims and lending them badly needed credibility.

According to the October 3 exposé, the allegation that Iraq was importing aluminum tubes for use in nuclear centrifuges was originally raised in 2000 by a mid-level CIA analyst, referred to by the *Times* only as Joe. As early as May 2001, experts in the Energy Department published a detailed finding refuting the claim that the tubes were suitable either to be used or adapted for use in the making of nuclear centrifuges.

They found that the tubes were in all likelihood intended for use in conventional rockets, precisely as claimed by the Iraqi regime. (This analysis has since been confirmed both by United Nations weapons inspectors and the CIA’s own Iraq Survey Group, whose report, issued October 6, flatly rejected the aluminum tubes-nuclear weapons canard.)

While analysts at the Energy Department thought the question had been resolved, it continued to be pushed within the CIA and received the support of CIA Director George Tenet.

Without any new findings, the aluminum tubes suddenly became a major public issue in September 2002. As Barstow, Broad and Gerth note in their article, the first detailed public account of the aluminum tubes came in a lead article on Page 1 of the *New York Times*, published on September 8, 2002.

They write that this article “cited unidentified senior administration

officials who insisted that the dimensions, specifications and numbers of tubes sought showed that they were intended for a nuclear weapons program. ‘The closer [Saddam Hussein] gets to a nuclear capability, the more credible is his threat to use chemical and biological weapons,’ a senior administration official was quoted as saying. ‘Nuclear weapons are his hole card.’”

The authors of the October 3 exposé write, without comment, “The [September 8, 2002] article gave no hint of a debate over the tubes.” Significantly, they do not assert that the *Times* was unaware of the debate.

The September 8, 2002 story was based entirely on unnamed administration officials, with no attempt to verify the content of what was being reported. No mention was made of the analysis made by the Energy Department and its conflict with the CIA, in spite of the fact that, according to the authors of the October 3 exposé, “the bureaucratic infighting was by [July 2002] so widely known that even the Australian government was aware of it.”

Nor do Barstow, Broad and Gerth give the names of the authors of the September 8, 2002 piece: Judith Miller and Michael Gordon.

Both the authorship and timing of the September 8, 2002 article are highly significant. Miller’s role as a conduit for the pro-war cabal within the Bush administration is by now notorious. In addition to her role before the war in promoting the lies of the administration, she published numerous articles after the war that purported to uncover evidence of chemical and biological weapons.

In particular, an article published on the front page of the *New York Times* on April 22, 2003 cited an unnamed Iraqi scientist whom Miller did not even interview as making claims that Iraq had destroyed stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons in the weeks preceding the American invasion. In her April, 2003 piece, Miller openly acknowledged that her article had been submitted prior to publication for vetting by the military unit with which she was traveling as an “embedded reporter.” (See “Manufacturing the news: *New York Times* report on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction”.)

Miller functioned as more than a reporter. She was a proxy for elements within the Pentagon—including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his undersecretary, Douglas Feith—as well as Ahmed Chalabi, the former Pentagon favorite among Iraqi exiles.

It later emerged that she exerted extraordinary control over the military unit in which she was “embedded”—a unit tasked with finding evidence of unconventional weapons. At one point she threatened to appeal directly to Rumsfeld and Feith if the unit’s officers did not go along with her attempts to “discover” weapons of mass destruction.

Even within the corrupt milieu of the US press, Miller’s actions and reporting were seen as an embarrassment and created something of a scandal. On May 26, 2004, the editors of the *Times* published an extraordinary statement criticizing the paper’s own pre-war coverage of the administration’s claims. While the statement did not mention Miller by name, it singled out several of the articles she had written—including the September 8, 2002 aluminum tubes piece—as particularly egregious examples of poor journalistic standards.

Given Miller’s close ties to the administration and Chalabi—who

supplied the administration with much of the phony “intelligence” on Iraqi WMD that Bush, Cheney and company used to justify the invasion—there can be no doubt she, and the *Times* as a whole, were well aware of the dispute within the intelligence community over the aluminum tubes. They chose to say nothing about it in the sensational September 8, 2002 article that launched the administration’s “Big Lie” campaign for war.

The timing of the September 8, 2002 article was anything but accidental. This was a critical turning point in the administration’s propaganda offensive. The problem facing the administration was that, having actively begun its war preparations, it had yet to manufacture a convincing rationale.

Why was Saddam Hussein such a grave threat to American security that he had to be removed by military force? There was no evidence that the Iraqi leader had anything to do with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Try as they might, the war plotters in the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA had been unable to come up with any evidence of collaboration between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Even bogus allegations of chemical and biological weapons were not sufficient to make the case for an unprovoked war. They had to play the nuclear card!

In August of 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney began pushing the idea that Iraq was close to acquiring nuclear weapons. “We know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons,” he said at the time. “Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon.”

By September 1, the administration had decided to ask Congress for authorization to invade Iraq and a vote was scheduled for early October. The Democratic congressional leadership supported an invasion, but they needed political cover. As far as they were concerned, the administration had not done enough to manufacture a pretext.

The Democrats demanded that the CIA produce a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that would make the case for war. The Bush administration agreed to slap together an NIE by early October, in advance of a congressional vote, with the understanding that the Democrats would, in return, supply it with the votes it needed to push through a war resolution.

In his book *Plan of Attack*, published in April of this year, Bob Woodward quotes House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt as saying to the president after a meeting on September 4: “I appreciate your outline, agree with your concern about Saddam Hussein... It’s about weapons of mass destruction getting in the wrong hands. They don’t see it.... We need to make it graphic.”

At the urging of Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the administration had also made the tactical decision to ask the United Nations for a new resolution authorizing the forceful removal of Saddam Hussein. Accordingly, Bush was preparing to speak before the UN to present the case for invasion, a speech that he was to give on September 12.

A new UN resolution would provide an invasion with a fig leaf of legality and multi-lateralism. However, in order to argue that Iraq was so grave a threat to American and international security that war, rather than an extended resumption of weapons inspections, was necessary, and to claim that the US would be acting in self-defense, the administration felt it had to raise the ante beyond chemical and biological weapons and invent a nuclear threat.

Thus, early September 2002 was the pivotal period in the public campaign for war.

Enter the *New York Times*. The front-page article of Sunday, September 8—fed to Miller and the *Times* by the Bush administration—was seized upon that morning by Bush administration spokesmen. Cheney went on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” citing the article to back up his claim that “with absolute certainty” Hussein was “buying equipment to build a nuclear

weapon.”

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice declared on CNN that the United States could not wait to invade: “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld urged the American people to “imagine a September 11 with weapons of mass destruction,” resulting in the deaths of “tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children.”

The calculated and dishonest character of the *Times*’ reportage of the tubes issue is underscored by its coverage after September 8, 2002. This history is set out in the October 3 exposé by Barstow, Broad and Gerth. Having plastered a sensational and alarming article on its front page, the newspaper subsequently buried on its inside pages articles hinting at the truth—that the claims were not credible and were hotly disputed by the most expert analysts within the government itself.

On September 13, the *Times* published an article on page A13 that noted in passing the internal differences within the intelligence community, but came out clearly on the side of the administration and the CIA. According to Barstow, Broad and Gerth, the September 13, 2002 article reported that “an unidentified senior administration official dismissed the debate as a ‘footnote, not a split.’”

They quote further from the September 13, 2002 piece: “Citing another unidentified official, the story reported that the ‘best technical experts and nuclear scientists at laboratories like Oak Ridge supported the CIA assessments.’”

This claim is flatly refuted by the October 3 account given by Barstow, Broad and Gerth, who report that Jon Kreykes, the head of Oak Ridge’s national security advanced technology group, was among those at the Energy Department who early on raised doubts about the aluminum tube-nuclear connection.

In their account, the three authors note that opposition among Energy Department nuclear analysts to the administration-CIA aluminum tube story was so intense, the administration felt the need to issue a directive that they not discuss the question with the press. Nevertheless, some of these analysts provided information to the prestigious Institute for Science and International Security, which issued a report on the subject September 23, 2002 that constituted “the first public airing of facts that undermined the most alarming suggestions about Iraq’s nuclear threat.”

The authors of the October 3 exposé note, “The *Washington Post* ran a brief article about the findings on Page A18. Many major newspapers, including the *Times*, ran nothing at all.”

On October 11, 2002, the Senate voted 77-23 to grant authorization for an invasion on the grounds of the “continuing threat” posed by Iraq and its weapons programs. Explaining his vote in favor of the resolution, Senator John Kerry declared, “There is little question that Saddam Hussein wants to develop nuclear weapons.”

Toward the end of 2002, the International Atomic Energy Agency resumed inspections of Iraqi weapons programs. The investigations conclusively refuted the theory that the aluminum tubes were destined for use in a nuclear program. Again the *Times* buried the story.

“On Jan. 10, 2003,” write Barstow, Broad and Gerth, “the *Times* reported that the international agency was challenging ‘the key piece of evidence’ behind ‘the primary rationale for going to war.’ The article, on page A10, also reported that officials at the Energy Department and State Department had suggested the tubes might be for rockets.”

On January 28, 2003, Bush made his infamous State of the Union address, and on February 5 Secretary of State Colin Powell went before the United Nations Security Council to present the administration’s arguments for war. On the question of the aluminum tubes, Powell felt obliged to hedge, stating, “People will continue to debate this issue, but there is no doubt in my mind these illicit procurement efforts show that Saddam Hussein is very much focused on putting in place the key missing piece from his nuclear weapons program: the ability to produce fissile

material.”

What was the response of the *Times*? The lead editorial on February 6, 2003 declared: “Mr. Powell’s presentation was all the more convincing because he dispensed with apocalyptic invocations of a struggle of good and evil and focused on shaping a sober, factual case against Mr. Hussein’s regime. It may not have produced a ‘smoking gun,’ but it left little question that Mr. Hussein had tried hard to conceal one.”

The *Times*’ reporting and editorial comments in the run-up to war were not mistakes, lapses in judgment, or the result of naïveté. The so-called “newspaper of record” was pursuing a conscious policy: it wanted war in Iraq.

Whatever differences the *Times* might have had with the administration over tactics, the newspaper was aiding and abetting the efforts of the government to dupe the public and create a climate of fear and hysteria conducive to launching an unprovoked war. It tailored its reporting to that end and served as a mouthpiece for the administration.

The attitude of the newspaper toward the US imperialist enterprise in Iraq has not fundamentally changed, and it continues to play a critical role in covering up the brutality of the occupation. The *Times* repeatedly parrots the official line about America’s “democratic” mission in Iraq, and has censored reports that highlight the criminality of the stooge regime of Iyad Allawi. It has refused to publish a single article concerning allegations that Allawi personally murdered Iraqi detainees last June—allegations that have a great deal more credibility than any of the pre-war assertions of Iraqi nuclear weapons activity.

One obvious question arises from the *Times*’ October 3 report on the aluminum tubes hoax: why did the newspaper fail to undertake such an investigation of the government’s claims in late 2002 and early 2003? The answer clearly emerges from the October 3 exposé itself: the *Times* was itself complicit in the government’s war conspiracy.

This history stands as a damning indictment of the role of the *New York Times* in facilitating the preparation and launching of a war of aggression. But its role is anything but an aberration. It is a concentrated expression of the role of the American media as a whole.



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