CNN news chief steps down: right-wing purge continues in US media

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The February 11 resignation of CNN Executive Vice President Eason Jordan is another scalp for the right-wing campaign to purge the American mass media of even the slightest criticism of the Bush administration's policy of global aggression. Jordan, the top CNN news official, quit after a week of hammering by talk radio hosts, *National Review*, Fox News and right-wing bloggers over his remarks during a panel discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 27.

In the course of a discussion about the large number of deaths among journalists covering the war and insurgency in Iraq, one American participant, Democratic Congressman Barney Frank of Massachusetts, referred to the 63 journalists killed as "collateral damage." Eason disputed the application of this term, used by the Pentagon to describe the slaughter of thousands of civilians as a result of the bombing and shelling of insurgents resisting the US occupation.

The CNN executive sought to distinguish the "accidental" killing of civilians from the "deliberate" killing of a number of journalists by American troops. In a subsequent interview with the *Washington Post*, Jordan said, "I was trying to make a distinction between 'collateral damage' and people who got killed in other ways." He cited incidents such as the deliberate US shelling of the Palestine Hotel, in which two cameramen were killed, and the fatal shooting of another cameraman near Baghdad. In the latter incident American soldiers claimed they had targeted the journalist because they thought his video camera was a grenade launcher.

At the Davos session, Congressman Frank and another Democratic legislator, Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, immediately challenged Jordan, claiming that he was suggesting a deliberate US policy of targeting journalists. Jordan sought to retreat, denying that there was any official policy on the part of the Bush administration and the military command, but he maintained that some soldiers had deliberately opened fire, "maybe knowing they were killing journalists, out of anger."

The Davos session was not broadcast and no transcript has been released. But an online posting by one participant was spread through blogs run by *National Review Online*, radio talk show host Hugh Hewitt and others, and then taken up more generally by right-wing circles as an expression of alleged "liberal bias" at CNN, the principal commercial rival of the right-wing Fox News.

It is remarkable how quickly CNN caved in. Barely a week of publicity led to the ouster of its senior news executive.

In the wake of last month's purge at CBS News over the broadcast of a report critical of Bush's National Guard service in the early 1970s, CNN, owned by the giant Time Warner conglomerate, had no stomach for a fight. Equally notable is the role of the two Democratic legislators, who provided validation for the anti-Jordan campaign from the liberal side of the political spectrum, seeking to outdo the right wing in their defense of the "honor" of American soldiers in Iraq.

The speed of CNN's collapse has provoked understandable consternation among some journalists. Steve Lovelady of *Columbia Journalism Review*, in a widely cited response, wrote, "The salivating morons who make up the lynch mob prevail." Dan Kennedy of the *Boston Phoenix*, an "alternative" newspaper, asked whether the issue "would have been lifted out of the right-wing-bloggers-go-after-Eason Jordan paradigm if it hadn't been for Barney Frank and Chris Dodd."

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In a statement issued announcing his resignation, Jordan wrote that he was stepping down "to prevent CNN from being unfairly tarnished by the controversy over conflicting accounts of my recent remarks regarding the alarming number of journalists killed in Iraq." He added, in a particularly groveling capitulation, "I never meant to imply US forces acted with ill intent when US forces accidentally killed journalists, and I apologize to anyone who thought I said or believed otherwise."

The truth is that US forces did deliberately target journalists in Iraq, and this is widely understood by both the working press and news executives like Jordan. The McCarthyite tone of contempt for freedom of the press was set by top officials of the Bush administration, including Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, who denounced independent Arab media like Al-Jazeera for providing hostile—and largely accurate—coverage of the US invasion and conquest of Iraq and the continuing Iraqi resistance.

US bombing destroyed an Al-Jazeera office in Kabul during the conquest of Afghanistan and devastated a similar facility in Baghdad, although the network had made the location known to US war planners well in advance. Last year, in response to American pressure, the stooge Iraqi government banned Al-Jazeera, first temporarily and then permanently, closing down its Baghdad bureau.

It is an unwritten rule of the corporate-controlled American media never to report a US government policy of killing journalists or any other civilians. It is permissible to report—within strict limits—that civilians or journalists have been killed by US military fire. But this is always to be presented as a regrettable accident, an unintended consequence of military action, or, in a handful of cases, the depraved action of individual soldiers—never the result of deliberate decisions made at the highest levels of the American state.

It was this rule that Jordan violated, however briefly and unwittingly, and for this violation he has paid the price.

There is considerable irony here, since Jordan himself has been the instrument of self-censorship within CNN. He was a top executive of the news network in 1998, when CNN retracted a broadcast report charging that the US military had used nerve gas during the Vietnam War, in a secret incursion into Laos known as Operation Tailwind. The producers of the program were fired, and the narrator, well-known journalist Peter Arnett, was discharged somewhat later.

In 2002, according to a report by British journalist Robert Fisk, Jordan ordered CNN reporters in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to stop reporting atrocities such as the Israeli shooting of ambulance drivers, unless they included film of Israeli government spokesmen claiming—without any substantiating evidence—that the Palestinians were smuggling weapons and gunmen in the ambulances.

Following the US invasion of Iraq, Jordan revealed, in an appearance on his own network's media program, "Reliable Sources," that CNN had used only administration-approved former officers as its expert commentators on military matters. The Pentagon had vetted all the retired generals in advance, he said, defending the network against right-wing critics who claimed that the experts were too critical of the Bush administration's war plans.

"I went to the Pentagon myself several times before the war started and met with important people there," Jordan explained, "and said, for instance, at CNN, 'Here are the generals we're thinking of retaining to advise us on the air and off about the war.' And we got a big thumbs-up on all of them. That was important."

As the WSWS noted at the time: "In other words, CNN made sure that any comments about the progress or difficulties in the war would be within the bounds set by the US military. Needless to say, there were no expert commentators brought on board from the antiwar movement." [*See* "Media bosses admit pro-war bias in coverage of Iraq"]

That such an individual should now fall victim to right-wing media censorship is particularly revealing, because it demonstrates the progressive tightening of the proscription against any commentary that reveals the ugly truth about the methods employed by American imperialism in Iraq, in Afghanistan and throughout the world.

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