

Further bullying of US media

White House demands Newsweek “repair the damage”

David Walsh
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Ratcheting up the Bush administration’s efforts to intimidate the already servile US media, White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan told a May 17 press briefing that *Newsweek* magazine had to do more to “help repair the damage” caused by its May 9 story about US military personnel flushing a copy of the Koran down a toilet.

The magazine’s article cited an unnamed US senior official as stating that an upcoming report on abuses at the Guantánamo Bay detention center would include a case involving the Koran. After the reference to the alleged incident set off rioting in several Muslim countries, notably Afghanistan and Pakistan, the military and the White House denounced the piece. The inevitable torrent of abuse from the right-wing media followed, decrying the “anti-military” and “unpatriotic” *Newsweek*. Just as predictably, the magazine capitulated Monday, retracting its story.

Newsweek’s apology centered on a technicality, the uncertainty of a journalist’s anonymous source as to which report had contained the incident involving the Muslim holy book. Numerous similar reports of such abuse have been published in the past several years, and given the well-documented brutality and scope of the physical and psychological torture meted out by the American military to detainees at Guantánamo and elsewhere, there is no reason to disbelieve the allegations.

The cowardice of *Newsweek*’s editors only encouraged the Bush administration and its right-wing attack dogs. Rich Lowry in the *National Review* denounced “the media culture of hostility to the military” and claimed that the US media “has defined its success since the Vietnam War almost exclusively in terms of exposing US wrongdoing.” Laughable as the comment may be, given the growing spinelessness of the American media over the past two decades, Lowry and his co-thinkers would like to see to it that no attempts to expose US wrongdoing occur in the future.

Rep. Deborah Pryce, Republican of Ohio, urged her colleagues to cancel their subscriptions to *Newsweek*, adding, “Retraction and regret will not atone for the reckless behavior of an irresponsible reporter and an overzealous publication.”

Her fellow Ohio Republican, right-winger Rep. Robert Ney, called the magazine’s conduct “criminal.”

McClellan’s comments Tuesday came on the crest of this wave of hypocritical and bullying comments. Referring to the press secretary’s remark a day earlier that *Newsweek*’s retraction represented a “good first step,” a reporter queried McClellan as to what else the Bush administration wanted the magazine to do.

McClellan responded, “The image of the United States abroad has been damaged; there is lasting damage to our image because of this report. And we would encourage *Newsweek* to do all that they can to help repair the damage that has been done, particularly in the region. And I think *Newsweek* can do that by talking about the way they got this wrong, and pointing out what the policies and practices of the United States military are when it comes to the handling of the Holy Koran.”

Responding to this astonishing pronouncement, the reporter commented, “With respect, who made you the editor of *Newsweek*? Do you think it’s appropriate for you, at that podium, speaking with the authority of the president of the United States, to tell an American magazine what they should print?”

McClellan began, “I’m not telling them. I’m saying that we would encourage them to help...” Reporter: “You’re pressuring them.” McClellan: “No, I’m saying that we would encourage them...” Reporter: “It’s not pressure?” McClellan: “Look, this report caused serious damage to the image of the United States abroad. And *Newsweek* has said that they got it wrong. I think *Newsweek* recognizes the responsibility they have. We appreciate the step that they took by retracting the story. Now we would encourage them to move forward and do all that they can to help repair the damage that has been done by this report. And that’s all I’m saying. But, no, you’re absolutely right, it’s not my position to get into telling people what they can and cannot report.”

However, that was precisely what McClellan was doing, as an exchange with another reporter at the briefing underscored. Pressed about whether he was asking *Newsweek*’s editors “to write a story about how great the American military is,”

McClellan made the claim that it was “incumbent” upon the magazine to help improve the image of the US military: “And they can do that through ways that they see best, but one way that would be good would be to point out what the policies and practices are in that part of the world, because it’s in that region where this report has been exploited and used to cause lasting damage to the image of the United States of America.”

Involved here is an effort to transform *Newsweek* and the rest of the media into a direct propaganda arm of the US government for the defense of its policies and furtherance of its aims. This is hardly a new phenomenon, but part of a protracted process that is reaching a critical point. The extreme right in government and the media sets the political agenda in the US and everyone else in the establishment jumps through hoops to appease them.

These related developments—the White House attempt to censor the news and intimidate all potential critics and the abject cowardice of *Newsweek*’s editors—express the advanced internal rot of American democracy. In the face of an administration with the most sinister and authoritarian ambitions, whose modus operandi consists in lying followed by more lying, the erstwhile liberal media gets on its knees to beg forgiveness for having sinned. Not the sin of relying on an anonymous source with a possibly faulty memory, but the sin of sullyng the honor of the US military and the cause of spreading democracy in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In any event, the *Newsweek* story only confirmed for many in that region what they already knew: that American imperialism’s crusade for freedom is a fraud, that the US military is oppressing broad masses of the population in Afghanistan and Iraq with the utmost violence and ruthlessness. The heavy-handed government suppression of the story—without ever addressing its substance—has only strengthened this conviction.

As to the claims about the abuse of the Koran, former prisoners at Guantánamo make far more credible witnesses than their jailers and torturers.

In the wake of the *Newsweek* controversy, as noted by the *Washington Post*, several former detainees reiterated their claims—or made new ones—that “they witnessed military police and guards at Guantánamo Bay throwing their copies of the Koran on the ground, stomping on them with their feet, and tossing them into buckets and areas used as latrines.”

The newspaper cited the comments of Moroccan Abdallah Tabarak, a former prisoner at Guantánamo, to a Moroccan newspaper in December 2004: “When I wanted to pray, they would burst into my cell with police dogs to terrorize me and prevent me from praying. They also would trample the Koran underfoot and throw it in the urine bucket. We staged protests in the prison about the desecrating of the Holy Koran, so the management promised us that they would issue orders to the American soldiers not to touch the copies of the Koran again.”

Joseph Margulies, an attorney for former detainee Mamdouh

Habib, noted that credence was immediately given to the initial *Newsweek* story throughout the world because of America’s atrocious track record. Margulies told a reporter, “You are only prepared to believe this if the US reputation has fallen so badly. If you learned that a female interrogator smeared fake menstrual blood on a detainee, as we did learn, then of course, you’re going to believe that they could throw a Koran in a toilet.”

The degree to which the US military has taken the complaints of former prisoners seriously can be gleaned from the comments of Department of Defense spokesman Lawrence DiRita at a May 17 press conference. DiRita dismissed out of hand the detainees’ allegations, explaining that there had been no previous investigations “because there haven’t been credible allegations to that effect.” Since presumably the only individuals present in a given cell are the prisoner and his abusers, who are probably not going to inform on themselves, what sort of allegation is likely to come from any other source aside from the detainee?

DiRita suggested, in fact, that the desecration of the Koran might have been done by the prisoners themselves, claiming that “detainees have, for whatever reason, torn pages from the Koran, etc.” He carried on in this vein, noting that “there have been instances ... where a Koran may have fallen to the floor in the course of searching a cell.”

If an honest media existed in the US it would have exposed the absurd contradictions in the Pentagon spokesman’s comments. After first asserting that “we have found nothing that would substantiate these types of allegations” about mishandling of the Koran, DiRita later stated, “I’m not aware that we’ve ever had any specific credible allegations to investigate. We certainly didn’t investigate detainees’ lawyers on television saying, ‘This is what happened to my detainee.’” In other words, in its non-investigation of the non-allegations, the US military has found nothing.



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