

Burying the lies on Iraq war

Judith Miller and the New York Times make a deal

Bill Van Auken
11 November 2005

The deal announced by the *New York Times* Thursday granting a severance package to its senior correspondent Judith Miller and acceding to various conditions demanded by her lawyers represents one more tawdry episode in the newspaper's deception of its readers on the war in Iraq.

Both sides agreed to keep silent on the size of Miller's golden parachute, but it is rumored to be in the high six figures.

One of the conditions of the settlement was reflected in the pages of Thursday's *Times* in the form of letter published on the newspaper's editorial page under the headline "Judith Miller's farewell." It consists of a self-serving and evasive defense of her record.

Miller wraps herself in the flag of the First Amendment, presenting herself as a martyr in the struggle to defend freedom of the press and the "right as a journalist to protect a confidential source."

This is an important principle, and one cannot always pick and choose the issue over which it must be defended.

It is one thing, however, to resist government coercion to reveal the identity of a whistle-blower who has exposed official malfeasance or to protect one who has risked his or her job in order to provide the public with needed insight into affairs of state that have otherwise remained hidden. It is quite another to shield one of the most powerful men in Washington from prosecution for criminal acts.

It is by no means clear who or what Miller was protecting in her decision to go to jail for 85 days rather than answer questions from Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald on her discussions with vice-presidential chief of staff I. Lewis Libby, who now faces criminal perjury and obstruction of justice charges.

The issue at stake—the deliberate leaking of the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame by Libby and others—was a government attempt to punish a genuine whistleblower, her husband, Joseph Wilson, who revealed that the administration had deliberately lied about Iraq attempting to buy uranium in Niger.

During the period of the buildup to the Iraq war and the invasion's immediate aftermath, Miller's articles in the *Times* served as a conduit for government misinformation and lies that were fed to the public about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction." The administration set out deliberately to terrorize the American people with these non-existent weapons in order to compel acceptance of a "pre-emptive" war of aggression.

Because of the *Times*'s widely perceived status as "paper of record," and even more so because of its erstwhile reputation as a voice of establishment liberalism, Miller's articles carried considerable weight, and were eagerly picked up both by the administration and the mass media throughout the country.

This was an enterprise in which she and Libby were ideological soul mates and political partners. Her relationship with him and other right-

wing figures in the Bush administration had nothing to do with the independent and even adversarial role that the so-called Fourth Estate is supposed to play vis-à-vis top government officials.

For years, Miller had functioned as kind of an in-house representative of a definite political tendency that enjoyed barely concealed support from the *Times* publishers and editors. This trend, referred to widely as neo-conservatism, involved a confluence of interests between right-wing American militarism and the Israeli Likud bloc's right-wing Zionism in promoting a war with Iraq and a broader campaign to impose Washington's hegemony over the Middle East.

Her specialization—as she spells out on her new web site, judithmiller.org—was "the Middle East, Islam, terrorism, biological and chemical weapons and other national security topics."

Her intimate relations with the Republican right apparently go back a long ways. In a profile of Miller, *Washington Post* reporter Lynne Duke quotes former *Times* correspondent Adam Clymer about an incident during the 1988 presidential campaign, in which Miller, then deputy Washington bureau chief, called him to demand that a story about Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis be kept out of the *Times*.

Duke writes: "The story was too soft, she complained—and said Lee Atwater, the political strategist for Vice President George H.W. Bush, believed it was soft as well. Clymer said he was stunned to realize that Atwater apparently had either seen the story or been told about it before publication." The *Post* quotes Clymer as saying, "She had gotten too close to her sources."

Miller claims in her letter to the *Times* that the principal reason for her leaving the paper is "because over the last few months, I have become the news, something a *New York Times* reporter never wants to be." She adds that, even before going to jail, she "had become a lightning rod for public fury over the intelligence failures that helped lead our country toward war," while acknowledging that "several articles I wrote or co-wrote were based on faulty intelligence."

The readers of this letter are clearly meant to assume only the purest motives on the part of both the Bush administration and herself, and, presumably, that she was unjustly scapegoated as a target for "public fury." In her rendition, it was merely a matter of the government's "intelligence failures" and her own articles based on "faulty intelligence."

But this was not a question of failure. On the contrary, together, she and the government enjoyed a brief bit of success in promoting an unprovoked war based upon lies. Intelligence was fabricated for this purpose, and she herself played a significant role in the process.

As it emerged in the aftermath of the invasion, Miller's *Times* "exclusives" were based largely on information provided by Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi exile leader and convicted embezzler who cemented close ties to the right-wing "cabal" centered in the civilian leadership of

the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney's office. His supposed evidence was widely mistrusted by US intelligence agencies, which saw him spreading false stories in an attempt to promote a US invasion that he hoped would land him in power.

The intimate collaboration between Miller and the government in this venture became even more evident after she was dispatched to Iraq as an "embedded" reporter with the military unit tasked with the vain hunt for the Saddam Hussein regime's WMD.

During this period, the *Washington Post* quoted military officials as charging Miller with "hijacking" the unit, using her close ties with top administration officials to intimidate officers in the field. She served as a liaison between the unit and Chalabi, while publishing more false stories claiming the discovery of "mobile weapons laboratories" and other supposed evidence of WMD that turned out to have no basis in fact.

Miller's collaboration with the government in this venture was officially and formally sanctioned. As she herself wrote, "The Pentagon had given me clearance to see secret information as part of my assignment." That is, her loyalties lay neither with the newspaper nor its readers, but with the government and its war aims.

In her letter, Miller also declares that she is "gratified that Bill Keller, the *Times's* executive editor, has finally clarified remarks made by him that were unsupported by fact and personally distressing."

Keller's "clarification" was apparently a product of the legal wrangling between Miller and the *Times* in securing the deal that got her off the newspaper. It is an indication of the sordid character of this agreement.

On October 21, under conditions of generalized outrage over Miller's conduct within the *Times's* staff, Keller had written a memo declaring: "But if I had known the details of Judy's entanglement with Libby, I'd have been more careful in how the paper articulated its defense..."

The executive editor continued, declaring that a memo written by another *Times* staff member, Dick Stevenson, "strikes me just right: 'I think there is, or should be, a contract between the paper and its reporters. The contract holds that the paper will go to the mat to back them up institutionally—but only to the degree that the reporter has lived up to his or her end of the bargain, specifically to have conducted him or herself in a way consistent with our legal, ethical and journalistic standards...'"

Yet, in cowardly retreat from this position, Keller writes in a fresh email accompanying the deal to get Miller out that the word "entanglement" in relation to Libby was "not intended to suggest an improper relationship. I was referring only to the series of interviews through which you and the paper became caught up in an epic legal controversy."

This is patently false, a retreat that seems to have been extracted from the *Times* editor in the paper's secret negotiations with Miller and her lawyers. If "entanglement" meant only interviews, than why did it affect the way in which the paper defended Miller, and why was it followed by the reference to "legal, ethical and journalistic standards?"

What this humiliating retraction clearly suggests is that the *Times* has not only given Miller a clean bill of journalistic health, but that it has made a binding promise never to write anything unfavorable about her again. If this is the case, it has effectively sealed off from the paper's readers and the general public not only the role of Miller, but that of the *Times* itself in helping to pave the way to war.

Keller became executive editor at the *Times* in 2003 as a result of the so-called scandal surrounding Jayson Blair, a junior reporter who was discovered fabricating quotes and taking material from other newspapers and wire services and presenting them as his own reporting. The episode was the occasion for unrestrained hysteria and institutional breast-beating, combined with an unseemly personal vilification of Blair, whom the *Times* itself described as "troubled."

Keller has written recently that it was because of the Blair crisis that the newspaper waited a full year before admitting that the stories it published on Iraqi WMD—the great majority written by Miller—were based on false

information.

In terms of the destruction of the *Times's* reputation, Blair's conduct counts for nothing alongside of the role played by Miller, with the newspaper's approval, now apparently followed by a legally binding agreement to carry out a cover-up.

Miller was able to play the role she did only with the full support of the newspaper's owners and editors. They knew full well that the person that they assigned to a story that was destined to pave the way to war was ideologically driven and wanted that war.

In this, Miller and the *Times* only played the most prominent role in what went on throughout the mass media, which abrogated its essential responsibility to critically question the claims of the government.

The claims now that the false news stories were the inadvertent product of "faulty intelligence" are patent lies. A decision was made within the media not to question the intelligence and to promote war propaganda.

The *World Socialist Web Site* questioned the government's story and persistently exposed the inconsistencies and fabrications in Washington's claims about WMD. And we were not alone. There were other critical web sites on the left that smelled a rat and set out to expose the lie that was being foisted upon the American people.

The *Times*, however, with its billions of dollars in assets and its hundreds of reporters, rather than conduct its own investigation, left the matter to Judith Miller, whose ideological convictions and political connections left no doubt that she would produce the "news" that the administration desired.

This decision flowed from the consensus within the American ruling elite that a war to conquer Iraq and assert US control over its vast oil reserves was necessary to promote the interests of American capitalism. The owners and editors of the *Times*, itself a major corporation, joined in this consensus, whatever their reservations about the Bush administration's tactics in launching the war.

Whatever deal the *Times* has concluded with Miller, these issues will not be swept aside. There has been too much blood—2,058 US soldiers are dead and over 15,000 wounded, while the Iraqi people have suffered a bloodbath, with well over 100,000 civilians having lost their lives.

The demand must be raised for a full and independent investigation into how the American people were dragged into this illegal war, including the role played by the media in making it possible. Those responsible must be held politically and criminally responsible. This demand must be joined with the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact