

Los Angeles Times fires liberal columnist Robert Scheer

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23 November 2005

On Friday, November 11, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that it has fired longtime liberal columnist Robert Scheer. In an effort to disguise the obvious political implications of removing its most vocal editorial critic of the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, the newspaper also dismissed its conservative editorial cartoonist, Michael Ramírez, and right-wing op-ed contributor David Gelertner, a Yale computer science professor.

Neither of these two, however, had Scheer's longstanding ties to the daily newspaper, which has been his journalistic home for 30 years, first as a reporter, and since 1993, as a weekly op-ed columnist, appearing every Tuesday. Since the firing, the *Times* has published many letters on the issue, the majority opposing Scheer's firing.

Scheer declared that he was removed for political reasons. "I've been a punching bag for [right-wing demagogues] Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh for years," he was quoted in the *Times* account, "And I think the newspaper finally collapsed." The new publisher of the *Times*, Jeffrey M. Johnson, gave no reason for his action. But the article reporting Scheer's dismissal quoted the columnist as saying that the newspaper "had grown tired of his...politics."

On his own blog the same day, Scheer posted the following statement: "Jeff Johnson, who has offered not a word of explanation to me, has privately told people that he hated every word that I write. I assume that mostly refers to my exposing the lies used by President Bush to justify the invasion of Iraq. Fortunately sixty percent of Americans now get the point but only after tens of thousands of Americans and Iraqis have been killed and maimed and the carnage spirals out of control. My only regret is that my pen was not sharper and my words tougher."

Scheer's syndicated column was immediately picked up by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and it continues to appear in the *Nation*. It will also be posted on many web sites.

The WSWWS interviewed Paul Kimmel, past president of Psychologists for Social Responsibility, which actively opposes the war in Iraq and last year presented Scheer with Joel R. Seldom Award for excellence in writing about issues of peace and justice. Kimmel said of Scheer: "He has a loyal readership who will boycott the newspaper. People will no longer have access to a point of view opposing the war, militarism, and the neo-cons, and wherever there is injustice in the world. Scheer has been consistently against the war in Iraq. He has said that the sooner we get out of there, the better off the Iraqi people will be. He has been very courageous and has taken on the neo-cons straight on." The columnist supported Democrats Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004.

There has been significant turnover at the *Times*, following the departure of Michael Kinsley several months after he was brought in for a brief tenure as editorial page editor. The driving force of the purging of Scheer seems to be the management of the *Times*'s parent, the Tribune Company, which bought the newspaper in 2000 and recently decided that the editorial page should report to Johnson, a financial manager, rather than to an executive with editorial experience.

The newspaper's coverage has begun to shift in a conservative direction, with news of torture or discoveries of the CIA gulag relegated to the middle or back pages of its front section. Bad news about the war in Iraq tends to be buried or treated cursorily. The day of the firing, the *Times* led its op-ed page with a piece headlined, "When Torture Is the Only Option," which

brazenly supported and justified the torture of suspected terrorists in defense of “democracy,” a position that Scheer would have opposed.

Since the Tribune Company bought the *Times*, it has embarked on a cost-savings plan to make the corporation more profitable. In 2000, the new owners stated in widely circulated memorandum that 1,600 jobs would be eliminated through buy-out offers and retirement. In June 2004, the paper announced it would lay off 120 staffers, including 60 from the editorial section, for a savings of \$2.4 million. Now, a total of 700 positions are to be eliminated by the end of 2005.

The fortunes of the company were further threatened when the Tax Court ruled against it in September and in favor of the IRS and slapped Tribune Co. with an almost \$800 million tax liability it inherited from its purchase of the Times Mirror Company in 2000. The company’s stock price plunged 4.3 percent in one day.

On November 14, 2005, the *Times* announced that would it cease the publication of 14 community news sections and begin its first round of layoffs with the dismissal of 125 employees. Soon afterwards, Fitch Ratings placed the *Tribune*’s commercial paper on “Rating Watch Negative.”

It is within this sociopolitical context that Scheer’s firing takes place. It is the latest milestone in the disciplining of the mass media to serve as nothing more than a propaganda mouthpiece for corporate America and a cheerleader for the criminal actions of the US government.



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