

# New York Times, Los Angeles Times respond to government witch-hunt: a cowardly evasion of democratic principles

Patrick Martin, Barry Grey  
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On July 1, a joint statement by Dean Baquet, editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Bill Keller, executive editor of the *New York Times*, was published by both newspapers in response to a McCarthyite-style attack on the papers. The vendetta was launched by the Bush administration and congressional Republicans over the newspapers' June 23 reports exposing a massive and secret CIA-Treasury Department program to monitor and review international banking transactions.

Similar reports were also published by the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

These articles concerned the Terrorist Finance Tracking Program, which was ordered by President Bush ten days after 9/11. Under the program, the Treasury Department, without congressional oversight, has been collecting data from the world's largest financial communications network—the Belgium-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, or SWIFT. The Bush administration has obtained the data through administrative subpoenas under a little-known authority of the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).

Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Treasury Secretary John Snow and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have all singled out the *New York Times*, in particular, publicly denouncing the newspaper and accusing it of jeopardizing US security. Prominent Republicans in Congress have waded in, some going so far as to accuse the newspaper of treason and demanding criminal sanctions.

Senator Pat Roberts, Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, announced his committee would begin an official investigation of the newspapers, and, in an unprecedented attack on freedom of the press, the US House of Representatives adopted a resolution June 29 condemning the news reports and, in effect, demanding

that the American media subordinate itself totally to the Bush administration's dictates.

The resolution, approved by nearly a straight party-line vote, 227 to 183, declared that the House “expects the cooperation of all news media organizations in protecting the lives of Americans and the capability of the government to identify, disrupt and capture terrorists by not disclosing classified intelligence programs.”

The party-line vote did not reflect any principled defense of freedom of the press on the part of the House Democrats. They would have been happy to join in a resolution merely condemning the leak and its publication, which would have won near-unanimous bipartisan support. They were prevented from jumping on the bandwagon by the tactics of the Republican leadership, which worded the resolution to convey political support for the performance of the Bush administration and to give rubber-stamp approval to every aspect of the banking surveillance program.

The July 1 commentary written by Baquet and Keller is a model of cowardice and equivocation. In defending their decision in this instance to reject government pressure and publish reports on the secret spying program, the editors cite their ongoing collaboration with the government in keeping information from the public. In so doing, they reveal the role of the American “free press” as an adjunct to the state and its intelligence agencies.

“Last week,” they write, “our newspapers disclosed a secret Bush administration program to monitor international banking transactions. We did so after appeals from senior administration officials to hold the story.”

As if to underscore that this decision was the exception, rather than the rule, Baquet and Keller declare: “No article on a classified program gets published until the

responsible officials have been given a fair opportunity to comment. And if they want to argue that publication represents a danger to national security, we put things on hold and give them a respectful hearing. Often, we agree to participate in off-the-record conversations with officials, so they can make their case without fear of spilling more secrets onto our front pages.”

Further on, they write: “When we come down in favor of publishing, of course, everyone hears about it. Few people are aware when we decide to hold an article. But each of us, in the past few years, has had the experience of withholding or delaying articles when the administration convinced us that the risk of publication outweighed the benefits. Probably the most discussed instance was the *New York Times*’s decision to hold its article on telephone eavesdropping for more than a year, until editors felt that further reporting had whittled away the administration’s case for secrecy.

“But there are other examples. The *New York Times* has held articles that, if published, might have jeopardized efforts to protect vulnerable stockpiles of nuclear material, and articles about highly sensitive counterterrorism initiatives that are still in operation. The *Los Angeles Times* withheld information about American espionage and surveillance activities in Afghanistan discovered on computer drives purchased by reporters in an Afghan bazaar....

“The *Washington Post*, at the administration’s request, agreed not to name the specific countries that had secret Central Intelligence Agency prisons, deeming that information not essential for American readers. The *New York Times*, in its article on National Security Agency eavesdropping, left out some technical details.”

In other words, on such matters as the maintenance of secret prisons where individuals, abducted by the US, are incarcerated, without any legal rights and subject to interrogation methods defined by international law as torture, America’s “newspapers of record” collude with the government to withhold information from the public. So much for “the people’s right to know!”

Aside from such indications of routine press complicity in predatory actions of US imperialism around the world, the statement is remarkable for its entirely uncritical acceptance of the propaganda framework adopted by the Bush administration to justify the war in Iraq and its war on democratic rights at home—the so-called “war on terror.”

The editors lament that since 9/11 “newspaper editors have faced excruciating choices in covering the

government’s efforts to protect the country from terrorist agents.” Further on, they write, “Our job, especially in times like these, is to bring our readers information that will enable them to judge how well their elected leaders are fighting on their behalf, and at what price.”

They are unwilling or incapable of stating the most fundamental truth—that on the scale of dangers to the democratic rights of the American people, the Bush administration is a far greater threat than a handful of terrorists. Al Qaeda, whatever its murderous and reactionary intentions, cannot overthrow the Constitution and establish a police state in America. The Bush administration has already taken many steps down that road. It is for that reason that it reacts so violently against a media report that reveals what any intelligent observer of the US political scene has long assumed: the US government routinely monitors all international financial transactions.

There is not a hint of this reality in the comment by Baquet and Keller. They completely accept the good faith intentions of the Bush administration. Whatever inroads have been made on democratic rights they are prepared to attribute to overzealousness in the defense of the country against terrorism.

Here is the real relationship between the “liberal” media and the capitalist state. The Bush administration is prosecuting a war of aggression in Iraq while establishing the infrastructure for mass repression of the American people. The corporate-controlled mass media, far from conducting itself as a watchdog, let alone an opponent of militarism and attacks on democratic rights, seeks only to play the role of an adviser and partner in defending the interests of the US ruling elite.



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