

Bill Keller at the University of Michigan

New York Times editor touts role of establishment press in “war on terror”

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The executive editor of the *New York Times*, Bill Keller, delivered a lecture on October 16 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor entitled “Editors in Chains: Secrets, Security and the Press.” Keller was presented to the audience of several hundred faculty, students and area residents as a spokesman for the liberal values of freedom of the press and open debate against the Bush administration and its policies of secret government and press censorship.

As the content of his lecture demonstrated, it would have been more accurate to present him as a representative of the decay of American liberalism and its abandonment of democratic principles.

Keller was chosen to give the Sixteenth Annual University of Michigan Senate’s Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom (named in honor of three professors who were purged by the university during the anti-communist witch-hunt of the 1950s) because the *New York Times* has been singled out for attack by the Bush administration and congressional Republicans for publishing articles exposing classified information on two of the administration’s secret spying programs: the National Security Agency’s eavesdropping, without court warrants, of telephone and email communications between Americans in the US and purported terrorist suspects abroad, and the Treasury Department-CIA program to monitor US and international bank records.

These exposés stand out as notable exceptions to the newspaper’s general policy of promoting official claims and vetting the news so as to shield the government’s more sinister and secret practices from public scrutiny.

The other domestic spying program to have been revealed by the American press is the NSA’s data base on millions of telephone calls made by Americans, compiled with the cooperation of most major US telecommunications companies.

Such police-state operations, as well as Pentagon surveillance of anti-war activists, state and local wire-tapping and monitoring of anti-government dissidents, and other programs that remain cloaked in secrecy, all of which are justified in the name of the “war on terror,” were only tangentially the subject of Keller’s remarks.

He offered no assessment of the major steps already taken in the direction of a presidential dictatorship, failing to even mention the passage last month of the Military Commissions Act, which sanctions drumhead courts, authorizes the president to declare any individual an “unlawful enemy combatant” and consign him to indefinite detention without legal recourse, permits the use of torture, and abolishes habeas corpus rights for non-citizen military detainees.

Nor did Keller directly contest the legality of the government’s domestic spying operations. Taken as a whole, his lecture was a concentrated expression of not only the cowardice of the *New York Times*

and the so-called “liberal” media as a whole, but their complicity in the war in Iraq and the unprecedented assault on the democratic rights of the American people.

This should come as no surprise to those who have followed the reporting and commentary of the *Times* on the “war on terror” and the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The “newspaper of record” has played a critical role in lending its prestige to a so-called war, never declared by Congress, that is indefinite in time and place and serves as an all-purpose pretext for military aggression and the gutting of democratic rights.

The *Times’* Judith Miller, among other *Times* reporters, systematically promulgated the administration’s baseless claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction both before and after the March 2003 invasion, while the newspaper’s chief foreign policy columnist, Thomas Friedman, churned out one rationalization after another for what he called a “war of choice” against Iraq.

Today, Keller and the *Times* adamantly oppose an early withdrawal of US troops from the devastated country. Their criticisms of Bush’s war policy are from the standpoint of the administration’s incompetence and its failure to crush the Iraqi resistance. The newspaper continues to cover up the scale of death and destruction wreaked by the US on the Iraqi people.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out in a statement distributed by WSWWS supporters to those who attended Keller’s lecture, the *Times* has relegated to its back pages, in one article, a scientific epidemiological study by the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, published earlier this month in the British medical journal the *Lancet*, which concludes that 655,000 Iraqis have died as a result of the US invasion and occupation of the country. (See “Why is the *New York Times* silent on massive Iraq death toll? A question for Bill Keller,” 16 October, 2006). The newspaper has not even bothered to publish an editorial on a study that documents a level of killing, more than three times the estimated death toll in Darfur, that deserves to be called genocide.

Keller directed his remarks toward several audiences, including liberal-minded individuals who continue to identify the *Times* with democratic values, and his counterparts in the American press. But his arguments were constructed to appeal, above all, to the American ruling elite and the Bush administration itself.

The *Times* editor’s main aim was convince the power elite that McCarthyite-style attacks on what he called “the establishment press” are counterproductive and dangerous from the standpoint of “national security” and the requirements of the “war on terror.” He spoke entirely as a loyal representative of the existing social, economic and political order, and a partisan of the foreign policy objectives of American imperialism.

Calling himself the “favorite chew toy of the right and left,” Keller sought in his opening remarks to distance himself from left-wing opponents of the war and the Bush administration with a quip about “faith-based partisans of the right and left.”

Speaking of the December, 2005 *Times* article that revealed the existence of the NSA domestic spying program and the June, 2006 article on the Treasury Department’s surveillance of bank records, he took pains to associate himself with the “war on terror” and grant these illegal and unconstitutional operations a degree of legitimacy they in no way merit. “Both of these programs,” he said, “were designed to catch terrorists, and, in case you’re wondering, like most Americans I’m in favor of that.”

Thus, whatever his criticisms of the Bush administration’s methods, Keller vouched for its stated motives in employing them. He made no attempt to explain why massive government spying on ordinary Americans was necessary to protect the people from terrorists. Starting from the legitimacy of the “war on terror,” he accepted in principle the government’s premise for undermining the Bill of Rights and constructing the legal and police-military framework for massive repression.

Keller reiterated this position several times in the course of his remarks. Speaking of the denunciations of the *Times* by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Republican congressmen following the publication of the article on the bank surveillance program, and noting the existence of a grand jury and possible subpoenas in relation to the NSA spying article, he said he recognized that some of this “reflected genuine frustration and the conviction that in perilous times the president needs extraordinary powers unfettered by congressional oversight, court meddling or the strictures of international law, and certainly safety from the attention of nosy reporters.”

Later he declared that the *Times* was “invested in the struggle against murderous extremism,” and even echoed Bush’s apocalyptic language, saying, “We have no doubts about where our sympathies lie in this clash of ideologies.”

Keller outlined what he called the journalistic ethics of the *Times*. This was a thoroughly self-serving and sanitized presentation of the real considerations that guide the newspaper’s reportage. Declaring, “We strive to be independent and impartial,” he acknowledged occasional failings, among which he noted “episodes of credulous reporting in the prelude to the war in Iraq.”

“We do not manipulate or hide facts to advance an agenda,” he said, an assertion that flies in the face of the newspaper’s record on Iraq and other aspects of the actions and policies of the government. Of course, full enlistment in the “war on terror” does not count, according to Keller, as promoting an agenda.

He continued, “Reporting alternative points of view is embedded in our culture and incorporated in our professional DNA”—this from a newspaper that rigorously excludes socialist views.

Finally, Keller said, “our mission is not to tell readers what we think, or what they ought to think, but to supply them as best as we can the basis to make up their own minds.” This, again, rings utterly false from a newspaper that has systematically concealed information that contradicts the official bipartisan line on both international and domestic affairs, and has promulgated government disinformation on such immense issues as the war in Iraq.

Keller then proceeded to the central point of his discourse, declaring that since 9/11 newspaper editors have faced “excruciating choices” in regard to exposing government secrets. He noted that the *Times* and other major newspapers have withheld information “because we were convinced that publishing it would put lives at risk.”

Based on Keller’s lecture, “putting lives at risk” is the basic criterion that guides the *Times*’ decisions on whether to publish or withhold information that the government wants to keep secret. But this criterion is, on its face, so abstract and arbitrary as to justify any act of self-censorship.

Keller smugly invokes “saving lives” as a justification for editorial decisions that have facilitated the destruction of thousands of American soldiers’ lives and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, not to mention all those caught up in America’s gulags in Guantanamo and elsewhere.

Next, Keller sought to establish his newspaper’s “responsible” approach to government secrets, noting that the *Times*, as well as the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and other major newspapers, have withheld information whose exposure would be detrimental to the “war on terror,” and gave a number of examples.

He cited as a legitimate “exercise in restraint” his decision, in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election, to withhold the story on the Bush administration’s NSA domestic spying program—a program that flouts the post-Watergate Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) and the Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution. He noted that he met with Bush personally in the Oval Office and the president threatened that the *Times* would be held “accountable” if it published the story.

The threat evidently had the desired effect, and Keller held the story for more than a year, publishing it only in December of 2005. In his lecture, Keller justified his capitulation on the grounds that “it took more than a year of further reporting” before he was convinced the newspaper knew enough to justify publication. This rationale, it should be noted, contradicts the explanation for this extraordinary act of self-censorship given in an August, 2006 column by the *Times*’ public editor, Byron Calame, who cited Keller as saying he decided to hold the story because top Bush administration officials assured him the NSA program was legal.

In his lecture, Keller dismissed his decision to keep the electorate in the dark about Bush’s unconstitutional invasion of their privacy rights as follows: “Critics of the Bush administration speculated that if we had rushed the information into print before the 2004 election, the outcome would have been different. I tend to doubt that that’s so.”

This is an evasion. The issue is not whether the information might have cost Bush the election—a distinct possibility given the closeness of the outcome—but the right of the American people to have, in Keller’s own words, “the basis to make up their own minds.”

Posing the question of what can be done to mitigate the conflict between the government and the press over the publication of secret or classified information, Keller proposed a change in his newspaper’s policy toward the confidentiality of anonymous sources that represents a major concession to government censorship and a blow to the ability of reporters to carry out investigative journalism.

He suggested that reporters limit their guarantee of confidentiality to a would-be whistle-blowers by telling him they would reveal the source’s identity rather than face jail time for defying a subpoena or have the *Times* face fines for contempt of court in leak investigations. “There may be cases where we risk losing an exclusive because a source will not accept these terms,” he acknowledged, and further admitted that “a lot of reporters I know reject this approach, fearing it would chill relations with sources.” But he defended his proposal nonetheless.

He then proceeded to the nub of his argument. Quoting from the brief of the *New York Times*’ lawyer in the 1971 Pentagon Papers case, he declared that a mutually advantageous relationship between the government and the press “assumes a respectful, if adversarial, relationship between an establishment press and a government that accepts the value of compromise in the conduct of public affairs.”

Keller made reference several times to the Pentagon Papers episode, when the *New York Times* published, beginning in June of 1971, a series of excerpts from a classified Pentagon report on the secret plans and actions of the US government, beginning in the 1960s, expanding the American intervention in Vietnam. The exposé had a galvanizing effect in fueling the anti-war movement. The Nixon administration obtained a court injunction to halt the publication of the papers, but the Supreme Court overturned the injunction in late June of 1971.

While Keller cited this case to bolster the *Times*' liberal glaring difference between the response of the *Times* 35 years ago to a war conspiracy hatched by the government—only after, it must be added, the war had produced a foreign policy and military disaster—and its servile role today only underscores the scale of the complicity and collapse of the liberal media.

Keller then launched into an argument on the dangers to the government and the political establishment of a weakening of the “establishment press” in the face of growing competition from alternative sources of news and opinion on the Internet. “The notion of an establishment press,” he warned, “is at least under siege.”

Elaborating on this theme, he said, “Legions of Internet journalists include at least a few who would feel no compunction about disclosing life-threatening information. If a blogger hostile to the Bush administration managed to document sensitive secrets about the war on terror, would he stop to weigh the consequences of making them public? And once the information had rebounded through the blogosphere, how long would the major news organizations hesitate before picking it up?”

To leave no doubt about his message to the Bush administration and the US ruling elite, Keller continued, “So while the mainstream press might not enjoy the hegemony it held before the Internet, we have not yet fallen into information anarchy. Most of what the country knows about the secret activities of the government, it knows thanks to serious news organizations that still take their responsibilities seriously.”

In other words, don't undermine our ability to control and vet the flow of information to the public and thereby weaken our ability to defend the vital interests we hold in common. When Keller talks here about “responsibility,” he is speaking of responsibility to the government and the ruling class, not to the people.

Extending his line of argument, Keller went on to assert that the Bush administration's posture of “with us or against us” and its “zeal to tighten controls on the flow of information” were harmful to “national security” and the “war on terror.” He said, “I strongly suspect that these attempts to enforce a single authorized version of the truth help explain why the most secretive of administrations has lost control of its most sensitive secrets.

“This distaste for dissent has another cost. Fighting terrorists, whatever method you might choose, depends on making alliances at home and abroad. It depends on a consensus of the civilized world, and I wonder whether the discrediting of honest critics has undermined the unity of purpose essential to such a struggle.”

He then quoted approvingly a commentary by Jonathan Rauch in the October issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* that criticized Bush for undermining the “war on terror.” Acknowledging that the “war on terror” requires “spying at home, detaining terror suspects and conducting tough interrogations” for “many years to come,” Rauch attacked Bush for “running the war against jihadism out of his back pocket, as a permanent state of emergency,” in which Bush “circumvents outmoded laws and treaties, when he should be creating new ones.”

Precisely which laws, treaties, or, perhaps, provisions of the Bill of Rights have become “outmoded,” neither Rauch nor Keller chose to stipulate.

Keller suggested in conclusion that the establishment press, by “forcing these questions onto the national agenda,” has “created the possibility of a national consensus, a foundation for the long defense of our freedoms,” (the latter phrase implying an identity, ala Bush, between the “war on terror” and the defense of freedom).

The reactionary substance of Keller's position was amplified in the question-and-answer period that followed his lecture. When a supporter of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party challenged his newspaper's virtual silence on the Johns Hopkins report on Iraqi deaths, Keller countered that the publication of a single article did not fit his definition of “suppressing” a story. “We didn't splash it on the front

page,” he said, although it were self-evident that a study by one of the largest and most prestigious schools of public health documenting hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths from the US war did not merit such prominent placement.

This reporter said that Keller's lecture had given no serious accounting of the enormous responsibility of the *New York Times* for the catastrophe unleashed by the United States on Iraq. He pointed out the contradiction between the journalistic ethics Keller had outlined and the newspaper's role in covering up the truth about the war. He then cited the newspaper's decision, in the run-up to the 2004 election, to suppress its report on Bush's illegal NSA spying program, saying, “The American people had a right to know before they went to the polls that one of the candidates, the incumbent president, had violated the FISA law, the US Constitution, and their privacy rights.”

In response, Keller admitted that the “American media let the country down in its reporting before the war,” but drew no further conclusions. Instead, he said it was “a little hysterical to suggest that Judy Miller and the *New York Times* took the country to war in Iraq,” and then gave the stock evasion/lie of both the Bush administration and the Democratic Party: “The notion that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction was not an eccentric notion in the year before the United States invaded Iraq. It was the prevailing view” of the Clinton administration, the UN Security Council, most weapons inspectors, etc.

In fact, the head of the UN weapons inspectors, Hans Blix, and the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, both refuted Washington's claims about Iraqi WMD and told the UN Security Council prior to the invasion that they had found no evidence of such weapons or weapons programs.

The socialist left press, beginning with the *World Socialist Web Site*, opposed and exposed the lies of the Bush administration, and the WSWS explained the real motives behind the US war. The 20 million people who demonstrated around the world against the impending war on February 2003, including millions of Americans, were not taken in by the administration's phony intelligence. But we are to believe that the *Times* was merely “credulous!”

Keller's lecture at the University of Michigan confirms the calculated complicity of the *New York Times* and the so-called “liberal” media in the Iraq war and the broader imperialist agenda of which it is a part. It demonstrates the intention of the *Times* to continue and deepen its collaboration with the government, and its lack of any genuine commitment to the defense of democratic rights.

The following leaflet, Why is the New York Times silent on massive Iraq death toll?, was distributed outside the lecture being given by New York Times Executive Editor Bill Keller at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on Monday, October 16.



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