Another damning admission from the New York Times: whitewashing Iraq war

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19 March 2007

The *New York Times* public editor is portrayed by this so-called paper of record as the "readers' representative." In reality, the institution serves as a clearinghouse for sharper critiques of the paper's right-wing editorial policy, where readers' accusations are aired, in order better to dismiss them.

With remarkable frequency, the public editor, Byron Calame, finds himself compelled to deal with mounting anger from the *Times'* readership over the newspaper's tailoring of its editorial decisions to meet the political needs of the Bush administration in general and its prosecution of the war in Iraq in particular.

Thus, in May of 2004, it fell to the public editor to issue the paper's first *mea culpa* regarding the newspaper's publishing of a long series of articles making "dire claims about Iraq" and weapons of mass destruction, most of them penned by the paper's senior correspondent, Judith Miller, who, as the recent trial of Vice President Richard Cheney's chief of staff I. Lewis Libby made clear, boasted of intimate connections with the administration, intelligence agencies and the right-wing Republican think tanks, whose views she shared.

Miller was employed as a conduit for unsubstantiated pro-war propaganda fed to her by Bush administration sources. Acting in concert, Miller, the *Times* editorial board and the paper's foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman, whose nauseating bully-boy columns made the case for war, played a major role in conditioning public opinion to accept military aggression against Iraq as inevitable.

Because of its reputation as the "newspaper of record" (not to mention its perceived status as the voice of establishment liberalism) the lies published by the *Times* about the supposed threat posed to America by Iraqi weapons stockpiles and alliance with Al Qaeda (both nonexistent) played a significant role, being exploited by the administration and echoed by the mass media nationwide.

In perhaps the most damning admission made by the newspaper, it fell to the *Times* public editor last August to admit that the editors had suppressed a story about the Bush administration's illegal NSA electronic spying program for more than a year, publishing it only in December 2005, and had then lied about it, failing to reveal that it had quashed these revelations on the eve of the November 2004 election.

Now, in a March 11 column, the public editor, Byron Calame, is at it again, fielding readers' denunciations of the paper for its coverage of news developments that have provoked even greater popular hostility to the war in Iraq. The first is the recent exposure of the abysmal treatment of wounded soldiers at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington; the second, the massacre in Haditha carried out by a unit of US Marines.

"I have been perplexed, shocked and angry that to date the *Times* has not printed a single article or word on the conditions at Building 18, Walter Reed Hospital!" one reader wrote the newspaper. "Truly, you must explain this terrible lapse in journalistic judgment to those of us who read and love the *Times*."

The *Washington Post* published a two-part series last month exposing what amounted to the gross abuse of maimed and psychologically traumatized veterans of the Iraq war, forced to live in squalor and subjected to a nightmarish combination of military discipline, bureaucratic red tape and outright neglect. The *Times*, however, failed to write anything about these conditions for a full week, and only then after the Bush administration began to force out senior army commanders in an attempt to quell the scandal.

"Readers have every right to be angry," Calame wrote, noting that even in its belated report on the scandal, the newspaper failed to give details of the appalling conditions in Walter Reed's outpatient facilities.

Contacted by Calame, *Times* executive editor Bill Keller first gave the unlikely alibi that the massive news organization was too short on staff to cover the scandal. "Our Pentagon reporters were working at full capacity on stories relating to the surge in Iraq and the allegations of Iranian meddling there," he wrote in reply to the public editor's query.

Calame notes, however, that had the editors of the "newspaper of record" wanted to cover the story they certainly could have, and that the exposure of conditions facing the wounded troops was the kind of "assignment almost any *Times* reporter could have handled."

Keller went on in his defense of the *Times* omission of coverage by pointing to a series the newspaper had run more than a year ago on the medical treatment of soldiers and veterans and the problems posed by the traumatic injuries being

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suffered in Iraq. That series, however, as Calame notes, was in no sense an exposure of the neglect and lack of care facing many of these wounded, as seen at Walter Reed.

Calame goes on to the failure of the *Times* to pursue stories first broken by other sections of the media. He points to the Haditha massacre, the unprovoked slaughter of 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians carried out during a five-hour killing spree by US Marines in November 2005.

He points out that, while *Time* magazine broke the story in March of last year, the *Times* made no mention of the massacre for two months, failing to publish an Associated Press article that appeared in the aftermath of the magazine piece. Again, the brief account that finally appeared in the paper came only after it was the subject of an official government response, in this case a press conference by leading Democrat, Representative John Murtha of Pennsylvania. Only at the end of last May, after the military itself had let it be known that the marines involved would be criminally charged, including on counts of murder, did the newspaper do its own story on the massacre.

"The March *Time* article didn't seem to stir the *Times* editors," Calame wrote, in a clear understatement.

Again, Keller was asked for an explanation. "News organizations are habitually slow at responding to stories broken elsewhere," he said. "The easy explanation, and one that contains a good measure of truth, is pride. Reporters (and editors) don't enjoy being beaten."

Calame accepts this explanation as good coin, writing that "the desire to be first with the news" is an overriding concern and pursuing stories broken by other publications "makes editors and reporters feel defeated."

Keller provided a second explanation: the uncertainty about whether the information in a story broken by another news organization can be trusted. "Until we verify—or until the story begins to have consequences—it's second-hand information."

This alibi might sound more convincing if the newspaper had not established such a long and ignoble record of publishing story after story based on second-hand and unverified information regarding "weapons of mass destruction" in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Given this record, it is hard to swallow the claim that embarrassment over being "scooped" or excessive concern for veracity are the guiding principles in how the paper deals with stories that serve to politically undermine the government or publicly expose the lies of the administration regarding the war in Iraq.

Political cowardice and complicity make for far more convincing motives. Editorially, the *Times* firmly opposes the demand for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

Moreover, it has consistently worked to conceal the extent of the carnage that this war has inflicted upon the Iraqi people, virtually ignoring the rigorous epidemiological study conducted last year by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, concluding that 655,000 Iraqis—if not more—had probably died as a result of the US war of aggression.

There is a common political threat that runs through the *Times'* sins of omission—the Iraqi death toll, Walter Reed, Haditha. In every case, the refusal to seriously cover these developments served to shield the Bush administration and the war in Iraq itself from political exposure.

Four years after the launching of the Iraq war, which the *Times* played no small role in facilitating, the newspaper continues to play the role of a loyal partner in defending the interests of the US ruling elite and in acting as a political gatekeeper in concealing or distorting facts to suit the needs of those in power.

Like the Democratic Party, the editors of the *Times* limit their criticism of the Iraq war to its "mishandling" by the Bush administration, while remaining committed to the imperialist goals that underlay the war in the first place. The ever-closer integration of this newspaper into the state apparatus is a telling manifestation of the demise of liberalism and the advanced degeneration of democratic processes as a whole in America.

As for the commitment of the *Times* publishers and editors to even a semblance of democratic forms at the paper itself, it is worth noting that the days of Mr. Calame's post appear to be numbered. Calame—the second person to hold the position—will end his two-year term as public editor in May. It was created by Keller when he took over as executive editor in July 2003, following the overblown furor generated by the Jayson Blair affair.

In an article published in January by the weekly *New York Observer*, it was revealed that Keller and others are considering abolishing the job. Calame was quoted as saying, "I think that Bill Keller has been—quite obviously—unhappy with some of the things I have written.... So it's not a surprise that the *New York Times* ... would want to sit down and think about whether they want to have a public editor."

Given the degeneration of the *Times* and other sections of the "free press" and their functioning ever more directly as a propaganda arm of the government, even such tepid forms of self-criticism become dangerous and intolerable.

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