New York Times bows to White House pressure over CIA tapes story

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The decision by the *New York Times* to bow to White House pressure and publish a correction of the sub-head on its December 19 story linking senior Bush advisors to the destruction of CIA torture tapes has been hailed by the Republican right—echoed by large sections of the media—as a major political victory.

Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, for example, headlined its story on the correction, "White House Slams New York Times Piece on Destroyed CIA Tapes," while Murdoch's main American print outlet, the *New York Post*, published a story with the headline "Times suffers a 'head' wound over CIA story."

In interviewing Mark Mazzetti, one of the reporters who wrote the story for the *Times*, CNN's John Roberts declared, "The White House tried to beat the stuffing out of you."

At least for the moment, the cowardly climbdown by the *Times* has tended to overshadow the substance of the story itself, which points to the administration's role in a criminal coverup of acts of torture that amount to war crimes.

The *Times* story established that at least four senior lawyers and White House advisors—Alberto Gonzales, Bush's White House counsel and then attorney general; Harriet Miers, his successor in the counsel position; David Addington, counsel and then chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney; and John Bellinger III, the National Security Council's top lawyer—had participated in discussions on the tapes and their destruction.

The story also cited one former senior intelligence official, who stated that "there had been 'vigorous sentiment' among some top White House officials to destroy the tapes."

Given their political record, there is every reason to believe that Gonzales and Addington were directly involved in the decision to destroy the tapes, in what amounted to criminal obstruction of justice, under conditions in which a federal court had ordered that all such evidence be preserved. They are both identified with the Bush administration's contempt for the law and assertion of the most extreme interpretation of unilateral executive power.

Moreover, given that all four worked as the closest advisors to the president and vice president, it strains credulity to claim that Bush and Cheney were kept in the dark about the criminal action that they were discussing with the CIA.

This is the basis of the extreme sensitivity of the White House to the *Times* story. There is a potential—given a sharp shift in the political situation—that these revelations could lead to an unraveling of the administration and criminal prosecution of its leading figures, including Bush himself.

So a campaign was mounted to change the story by focusing on the offending second deck of the *Times* headline, which read, "White House Role Was Wider Than It Said."

White House press secretary Dana Perino issued a written statement Wednesday morning claiming that the eight-word subhead implied "that the White House has been misleading in publicly acknowledging or discussing details related to the CIA's decision to destroy interrogation tapes."

The statement insisted that the White House press secretary, acting on the advice of the White House general counsel, had refused to comment publicly on the issue because of an ongoing investigation by the Department of Justice and the CIA Inspector General. In other words, the role of the White House could not be wider "than it said," because Perino had refused to say anything.

"The New York Times' inference that there is an effort to mislead in this matter is pernicious and troubling, and we are formally requesting that NYT correct the sub-headline of this story," the statement declared.

It went on to criticize the paper for its "reliance on un-named sources and individuals lacking a full availability of the facts," comparing this method unfavorably to what it portrayed as the more sensible method favored by the White House, the CIA and the Justice Department, "where facts can be gathered without bias or influence and later disseminated in an appropriate way."

Later on Wednesday, the better part of the White House press briefing by Perino was given over to an exchange on the matter that frequently descended to the level of the absurd. Much of it consisted of Perino taking umbrage over what she claimed was the newspaper's suggestion that she personally had "misled the American public."

Her argument consisted of the assertion that only she could speak formally for the White House, and therefore to publish the subhead "White House Role Was Wider Than It Said" constituted a direct charge that she had either lied or changed her story. Instead, she insisted, she had refused to comment on the destruction of the tapes, as she continued to do during the press conference.

"I speak for the President and the White House," Perino said at one point. "This says that I was misleading, and I was not."

"It doesn't say you," a reporter responded. "It doesn't say you at all...They didn't specifically say its you. It's talking about the White House, the administration in general."

"I speak for the White House," Perino reiterated. "I represent the

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White House."

Asked why she was "taking it personally," Perino responded: "It's not a personal thing. The White House asked for a correction. And I would remind you, the *New York Times* is going to do one." Thus ended the discussion.

As anyone with even a passing acquaintance with American politics knows, the phrase "White House" is routinely used—particularly in the enforced shorthand of newspaper headlines—to refer to the executive branch of the US government.

Whatever the intellectually challenged Ms. Perino did or did not say from her podium in the White House briefing room, administration officials had assured reporters that the White House had no significant involvement in the discussions that led to tapes' destruction. That had now been exposed as a lie.

Therefore, there was nothing to retract in relationship to the headline, and instead of printing a correction, any newspaper genuinely committed to upholding its independence and defending first amendment rights in general would have told the administration to get lost and denounced the demand from Perino as a blatant attempt at political intimidation and censorship.

Instead, the *Times* quickly caved in to the White House's attack, publicly announcing that it would print the retraction. In its Thursday edition, it stated that the headline referred "imprecisely to the White House's position thus far on the matter." The newspaper accepted the specious argument that "the White House itself has not officially said anything on the subject, so its role was not 'wider than it said.'"

This revealing episode is only the latest in a long series of actions that have exposed the so-called "paper of record" as a willing and servile accomplice of the Bush administration.

It is worth recalling that in August 2002, precisely when Abu Zubaydah and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri were being waterboarded and subjected to other forms of torture at Guantanamo—acts filmed on the videotapes that we now know were destroyed—the *Times* published a feature article by its national security correspondent Eric Schmitt under the sarcastic headline, "There are ways to make you talk." The article, based entirely on the assurance of US officials, told the *Times'* readers that the interrogation methods being employed by the American military, CIA and FBI were all in strict compliance with the Geneva Conventions and that "torture is not an option."

Needless to say, the *Times'* editors felt no compunction to retract or correct this article, which has since been revealed as false and a whitewash of war crimes.

The incestuous relationship between the *Times*, known as the voice of America's erstwhile liberal establishment, and the right-wing Republican administration was revealed most clearly in the newspaper's handling of a story exposing the illegal warrantless wiretapping carried out by the National Security Agency against American citizens under Bush's orders.

The *Times* reported the massive NSA spying operation in December 2005, acknowledging that it had—at the urging of the Bush administration—suppressed the story "for a year." Only later did the newspaper's public editor reveal that the discussions on squelching the exposé had actually unfolded in the weeks leading up to the November 2004 election.

Times' The editors' effe decision of to stop the publication was to deny American voters as they went to the polls the knowledge that the incumbent president was carrying out a massive abuse of power by spying on US citizens in violation of the law and the Constitution. It could well be argued that this act of self-censorship played a decisive role in Bush's re-election.

It should be noted that the publication in the *Times* earlier this month of the original article on the destruction of the CIA videotapes came only after discussions with the government, the contents of which are unknown. The newspaper's forewarning allowed CIA director Michael Hayden to have the first word on the destruction of the tapes, in which he sought to frame the decision as an entirely legal and necessary act.

There is no telling how long the *Times* sat on this story, but leading Democrats were aware of the tapes' destruction at least as early as November 2006. They knew of the existence of the tapes themselves in 2003. There is every reason to suspect that the *Times*, which its myriad ties to the political establishment, had at least some knowledge of the story as well.

Then there is the paper's long record of promoting the illegal war against Iraq, both in the disseminating false information about non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" by its former senior correspondent, the ideologically driven Judith Miller, and in the noxious opinion columns of its foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman.

The *Times*, as with the American media as a whole, has done everything it can to cover up the real brutality of the American occupation of Iraq. It helped to bury the story of the estimated number of Iraqi civilians killed as a result of the US invasion—655,000 through June 2006—produced by the medical journal *Lancet.* It did not even report on a subsequent estimate by the British polling agency ORB, which put the number at 1.2 million.

This latest capitulation over the headline of the CIA tapes story is only one more verification of a fundamental trend: the disappearance of anything that could legitimately be described as a "fourth estate," a genuinely independent media committed to the exposure of abuses of state power and the defense of the democratic rights of the population.

Instead the mass media, itself run by massive capitalist corporations, serves largely as a propaganda arm of the government and the ruling elite, suppressing and distorting information as needed and seeking to shape public opinion to conform to their interests.

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