

Fallout from McClellan book: The Iraq war's "complicit enablers," then and now

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Former White House press secretary Scott McClellan's new book indicting the Bush administration for employing a "political propaganda campaign" and deception to drag the US into an "unnecessary war" in Iraq has unleashed a wave of bitter recriminations from the Republican right, while prompting opportunist attempts by Democrats to exploit the tell-all memoir for their own political purposes.

As McClellan began making the rounds of television news interviews, former White House counselor Dan Bartlett described the book, "What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception," as "total crap" and called the ex-press secretary's actions "beyond the pale." Former White House counter-terror aide Frances Townsend told CNN that McClellan was "self-serving, disingenuous and unprofessional."

Meanwhile, both Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton worked McClellan's book into their Democratic presidential campaigns.

Clinton lionized McClellan, declaring "this young man essentially apologizes for having been part of misleading America for three years. He talks about how difficult it was that our president and those working with him didn't, either level with the American people, or didn't change course when circumstances demanded it."

Apparently anxious to shift the subject from the run-up to the Iraq war, when Clinton was one of the majority of Democrats in the Senate voting Bush a blank check to invade Iraq, she continued: "There isn't any doubt that President Bush has misled us. The question now is, what kind of president do we need going forward."

The Obama campaign used the book to counter charges by Republican candidate Senator John McCain that the Democratic front-runner lacked experience in relation to Iraq. "On the day after the former White House press secretary conceded that the Bush administration used deception and propaganda to take us to war, it seems odd that Senator McCain, who bought the flawed rationale for war so readily, would be lecturing others on their depth of understanding about Iraq," read a statement issued by the Obama campaign.

No attempt was made to draw out the staggering implications of the confirmation, from inside the White House, that a war that has cost over one million Iraqi lives and killed or wounded tens of thousands of US troops was launched through "deception and propaganda." It was merely used as a talking point to promote Obama as a better candidate than his Republican rival.

One Democratic congressman, Robert Wexler of Florida, called for McClellan to testify under oath before the House Judiciary Committee. He focused on the section in the former presidential spokesman's book dealing with the leaking of the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson and the implication that Karl Rove, Lewis Scooter Libby and Vice President Dick Cheney participated in a conspiracy to obstruct justice.

In a letter to supporters, Wexler said that the statements in McClellan's book justified impeachment hearings against Cheney. He quickly acknowledged, however, that the continuing revelations of outright

criminality in the administration "have not been enough to convince even a majority of the liberal and progressive Members of Congress to support impeachment hearings. In addition, the leadership of the Democratic Party in Congress genuinely feels that pursuing impeachment will jeopardize our congressional agenda and threaten gains in the November elections."

In other words, the Democratic leadership—which has repeatedly declared impeachment "off the table"—intends to do absolutely nothing about McClellan's damning testimony, outside of milk it for a few cheap political points. It cannot follow the logical course of pursuing those responsible for a criminal war of aggression, because the Democrats are themselves wholly complicit. Indeed, the party's leadership in the House and Senate are in the process of approving another \$165 billion to continue a war that, as House Speaker Pelosi admitted yesterday, is based on lies.

Perhaps the most revealing reaction was that of the media itself to McClellan's indictment of those whom he fed the false propaganda for war. He essentially accused them of serving as a willing accomplice of the Bush administration in deceiving the American people.

In his book, McClellan charges that the press was "too deferential to the White House and to the administration in relation to the most important decision facing the nation during my years in Washington, the choice over whether to go to war in Iraq." The discrediting of the false pretexts used by the administration to launch the war, he added, "should never have come as such a surprise," implying that the media was well aware that it was regurgitating false propaganda, but never told its viewers and readers.

He added that the "'liberal media' didn't live up to its reputation," and, most damning of all, referred to them—quite accurately—as "complicit enablers" of the Bush war drive.

In response, some members of the media made partial admissions that McClellan's charges had merit. CNN's correspondent Jessica Yellin, appearing on the cable news network Wednesday night, acknowledged that news executives—she later clarified that she was referring to MSNBC, where she worked in 2003—pressured her and others to "put on positive stories about the president." She added that "they would edit my pieces...they would turn down stories that were more critical."

Yellin explained, "The press corps was under enormous pressure from corporate executives, frankly, to make sure the war was presented in a way that was consistent with the patriotic fervor in the nation and the president's high approval ratings."

Appearing together on the "Today" show Wednesday, three news anchors—Brian Williams of NBC, Katie Couric of CBS and Charlie Gibson of ABC—were asked about McClellan's indictment of the media.

The ex-press secretary's assessment was "fairly accurate," Couric acknowledged. "I know when we were covering it—and granted in the spirit of 9/11, people were unified and upset and angry and frustrated—I do think we were remiss in not asking some of the right questions." She added, "There was such a significant march to war, and people who questioned it very early on, and really as the war progressed, were

considered unpatriotic. And I think it did affect the way—the level of aggressiveness that was exercised by the media.”

Gibson denied that the media bore any blame for broadcasting administration lies, insisting, “It was just a drumbeat of support from the administration. It is not our job to debate them. It is our job to ask the questions.”

Williams said that the White House and the Pentagon exerted enormous pressure on the news media to stick to the propaganda line. “The tone of the time was quite extraordinary.”

While there was a significant element of intimidation involved—both Williams and Couric cited cases where the administration threatened to block access for reporters who asked critical questions—the corporate-controlled media was hardly a passive or unwilling collaborator in the march to war.

The news media did not capitulate to “patriotic fervor” and the “spirit of 9/11,” giving the people what they wanted to hear. It was the media that actively sought to whip up pro-war sentiment and to falsely link the impending unprovoked invasion of Iraq with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

In fact, the period leading up to the invasion saw the biggest demonstrations in history, in the US and around the world, with tens of millions taking to the streets to oppose a war against Iraq. Polls conducted at the time showed a majority opposed to the Bush administration’s drive to end weapons inspections in order to launch an immediate war. There was widespread skepticism about the pretexts given by the administration for invading—weapons of mass destruction and alleged ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

Virtually none of these sentiments found expression in the media, while the massive demonstrations themselves went virtually unreported. There was no doubt an element of cowardice in this phenomenon, fear of being branded “unpatriotic”—not by the public, but by the political right, which set the agenda.

Commenting on McClellan’s book Wednesday, NBC’s Washington bureau chief Tim Russert, noted that it indicted the Bush administration for war “propaganda” and taking the country to war on false pretenses. “This is not Moveon.org,” he declared. “This is someone who was serving in the White House for seven years.”

This distinction is telling. The mass media instinctively rejected—and continues to reject—any critique of the war from the left—even from a Democratic Party-oriented pressure group like Moveon.org. There are no new revelations in McClellan’s book. That the Bush administration was using lies and propaganda to prepare a war of aggression was something that the *World Socialist Web Site* continuously reported and documented from 2001 onwards. But from the standpoint of the corporate-controlled media, anything coming from the left is not a legitimate part of public opinion or debate.

More fundamental than political cowardice in this process are social interests. The mass media is owned almost entirely by massive capitalist conglomerates. Viacom Inc.’s CBS, Walt Disney Co.’s ABC, AOL Time Warner’s CNN, General Electric Co.’s NBC and Fox, owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., did not merely bow to pressure from the White House and the right, they actively promoted the war, which was seen as furthering the profit interests of corporate owners and major shareholders whose holdings also extend to other sectors of the economy, including oil, arms and finance capital.

For its part, the *New York Times* published a cynical editorial on McClellan’s book entitled “I knew it all along,” suggesting that the express secretary’s exposures of the Bush administration were motivated only by a lucrative book deal. The *Times* commented: “For all of its self-serving, the book does serve one good purpose: It is a reminder that we still do not know precisely how far Mr. Bush, Mr. Cheney and the others were willing to wade into that ‘culture of deception.’”

Times itself was up to its neck in the campaign to deceive American people and promote the agenda of a war against Iraq is nowhere acknowledged. It played perhaps the most influential and odious role in this operation, not only echoing but embellishing the administration’s phony charges about “weapons of mass destruction” in preparation for the invasion.

The *Times* and other sections of the media, meanwhile, are engaged once again in the same kind of operation, paving the way to yet another eruption of American militarism, this time against Iran.

Whatever McClellan’s intention, “culture of deception,” the provocative phrase included in the book’s title, describes not the Bush administration or partisan politics in Washington, but the political establishment a whole—including the Congress, the Democratic Party, the media and the major banks and corporations—which has based its entire policy, both foreign and domestic, on systematic and increasingly blatant lying to the American people.

The lies about weapons of mass destruction were driven by the need of the American ruling establishment to hide from the American people the predatory class interests that underlay the war drive. The war was waged not to “protect” the American people, but to secure by means of aggressive war a key strategic objective of US imperialism, hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

McClellan, it should be noted, continues this practice of lying, claiming in his book that the real motive for the war was not WMD and terrorism, but the desire of Bush and Co. to spread democracy in the Middle East, perhaps the most ludicrous pretext of them all.

Such lies have profound social roots. They become a necessity, and a political reflex, because the interests of the financial elite, represented by both political parties, stand in such sharp contradiction to those of American working people, the overwhelming majority of society.

The controversy surrounding the McClellan book has once again demonstrated that even when these lies, involving criminality and mass murder, are exposed, there are no real consequences. The same forces that McClellan refers to as Bush’s “complicit enablers” in launching the war in Iraq are still at work, allowing him to continue the bloodbath right to the day he leaves the White House.

It is thus a remarkable fact that despite all the efforts of administration propaganda, bolstered by the myriad “enablers” in the media and the Democratic Party, the vast majority of the American people have turned decisively against the war. They did so, not in response to criticism of the war within the political establishment or the media, but independently, out of their own bitter experiences with the war and the broader social crisis of American capitalism.

In the end, holding accountable those who told the lies and carried out a criminal war of aggression depends upon the emergence of a new, independent political movement of working people in struggle against both the war and the capitalist system that gave rise to it.



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