

How the American “free press” toed the government line on Georgia

Tom Eley
22 August 2008

During the first several days of the war between Georgia and Russia, the US media’s readers and viewers could find in the nation’s newspapers and on its airwaves a degree of ambiguity and even rare moments of objectivity. Though vaguely anti-Russian, a good share of the initial coverage tended not to lay the blame for the war fully at the feet of Moscow and provided some insight into the Georgian military’s devastation of the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali.

Then, between August 11 and 12, a sharp change occurred in the way the US media presented the war. The initial response to the war gave way to what can only be described as a tidal wave of anti-Russian propaganda. Now there was only one side to the story. What had happened?

The change in the media line corresponded to a sharpening of the anti-Russian posture of the Bush administration. For the first few days of the conflict, when no clear line had been laid down by the government, the mainstream media was somewhat at sea. But once the official line had been clearly established, the corporate-controlled media snapped to attention and marshaled all of its considerable resources to perform its customary service of vetting the “news” and manipulating public opinion to suit the aims and requirements of the state.

The media presentation of the Georgia crisis is a textbook example of the way in which the “free press” in America functions as little more than a semi-official propaganda agency of the government.

The first response of US media on August the 9 was to shrink before a complex story. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, a reliable mouthpiece for the most right-wing sections of the political establishment, published an editorial noting that it was “unclear at this stage which side is more at fault for the current fighting,” adding “that the two countries have seemed to want [war] for some time.”

The *Chicago Tribune* headlined its article on the developments, “Georgian Conflict Puts US in Middle.” The *Los Angeles Times*’s lead article was entitled “US Pushes Truce in Caucasus Fighting,” and its subtitle noted that the war “Put Washington in a Tough Spot.”

The *New York Times*’s first article on the war was headlined “Russia and Georgia Clash Over Separatist Region.” The *Times* also published an article entitled “Taunting the Bear.” It was a lengthy analysis of the interaction of ethnic and regional tensions in relation to Georgia’s breakaway provinces, Tblisi, and Moscow. The article was fairly even-handed in its treatment of Russia, although, true to form, the *Times* elided the provocative role the US has played in the Caucasus with its long-term strategy of encircling Russia and securing US access to Caspian Basin oil via pipelines that bypass Russian territory. On August 10, the *Times* published two further articles that maintained a semblance of balance, bearing the headlines “In Georgia Clash, a Lesson on US Need for Russia,” and “In Georgia and Russia, a Perfect Brew for a Blowup.”

On the other hand, the *Washington Post* responded to the war with its own rapid mobilization against Russia. On August 9, it produced an editorial entitled “Stopping Russia,” pinning the blame on Russia’s pursuit of “hegemony in the Caucasus” (which, the article left unstated,

runs headlong into the US pursuit of *worldwide* hegemony). Ready from the first for brinksmanship, the *Post* ominously demanded that the “United States and its NATO allies impose a price on Russia.”

In those first few days of confusion, the media happily had two diversions at their disposal. Even as the situation in Georgia was erupting, the media continued to lavish its attention on the extra-marital affair of former senator John Edwards and the opening days of the Beijing Olympics. The outbreak of a war that threatened to draw into its wake two powers armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons fell to third place after the private sexual peccadillo of a politician and the hoopla surrounding the Olympics opening ceremonies.

The media’s initial bewilderment reflected the response of the White House, and, in particular, President Bush, who reacted to word of the fighting with a degree of ambiguity and indecisiveness not typical of a politician who characteristically lets pass no chance to engage in military bluster.

It is inconceivable that Georgia’s attack on South Ossetia—timed to coincide with the opening of the Olympics—was undertaken without US approval. Georgia is a vassal state of the US. Its military is funded, trained and technically supported by the American military. Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian president, maintains close relations with Bush. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had been in Tbilisi only a month earlier endorsing Saakashvili’s application for membership in NATO and his avowed aim of recapturing South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Nor is it conceivable that the United States was unaware that Russia would be compelled to respond to such a provocation. Nonetheless, it seems that the swiftness and force of Russia’s response took the Bush administration aback.

Bush’s first response on August 8, through spokeswoman Dana Perino, was to call for “the territorial integrity” of Georgia. But the US president, who was in Beijing attending the Olympics opening ceremonies, also struck a public pose of mediator, calling for restraint on all sides. “We urge all parties, Georgians, South Ossetians and Russians, to de-escalate the tension and avoid conflict,” he declared through his spokeswoman.

At that point, however, it was not yet clear how quickly and decisively the Russian force would rout the much smaller Georgian military.

Rice took a stronger position, calling on Russia “to respect Georgia’s territorial integrity and withdraw its ground combat forces from Georgian soil”—in other words, to accede to the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia.

The aspirants for the White House weighed in on August 8. Democratic candidate Barack Obama’s first response to the invasion was virtually identical to that of Bush, calling for the territorial integrity of Georgia, but appealing to “all sides” in the conflict and calling for international mediation. McCain much more clearly anticipated the foreign policy consensus that would emerge, quickly adopting a belligerent anti-Russian posture and demanding that Russia “immediately and unconditionally cease its military operations and withdraw all forces from sovereign Georgian territory.”

On August the 9, Bush largely reiterated his position toward Russia. His statement remained very similar to the position of Obama, calling for international mediation and a “stand-down by all troops.”

On August 10, while still in Beijing, Bush assured NBC Sports that he had a “good relationship” with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. However, his position became somewhat more focused, as the scale of the Georgia’s military debacle became evident and Georgian forces withdrew from South Ossetia. He now called for a return to the “status quo ante,” meaning a withdrawal of Russian forces that had occupied both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as military bases outside of the breakaway provinces.

The White House indicated that it held the same position on the conflict as France, and the Bush administration farmed out the diplomatic work of reaching a cease-fire to French President Nicholas Sarkozy and the European Union.

The hand-raisers and talking heads of the US media stood ready at their posts, but they had yet to receive clear instructions.

On August 10 and 11, the marching orders arrived. On Sunday the 10th, while Bush was still in China, Vice President Dick Cheney intervened to press for a more aggressive anti-Russian policy. In a telephone conversation with Saakashvili, he denounced Russian “aggression” and told the Georgian president that Russia’s actions ““must not go unanswered.”

The next day, Bush returned from Beijing and issued a highly provocative statement from the White House Rose Garden that signaled a sharp escalation of the confrontation between the US and Russia. Denouncing Russia’s “dramatic and brutal” military escalation and charging that Russia was seeking to overthrow Saakashvili, he demanded that Moscow agree to an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of its troops from Georgia. All pretense of even-handedness and mediation had been dropped.

On August 11, neoconservative Robert Kagan wrote a hysterical opinion piece in the *Washington Post* equating Russia’s limited invasion of Georgia with the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Kagan assured his readers that “the details of who did what to precipitate Russia’s war against Georgia are not very important”—a mere trifle, really. On the same day, another neoconservative, William Kristol, published a similar piece in the *New York Times*.

Within hours of Bush’s shift, Obama and the rest of the political establishment were on board with the new line. Obama, then on vacation in Hawaii, altered his position, issuing a statement that placed full blame on Russian “aggression.”

The media was close behind.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* each produced articles on the 12th attributing the war to a Russian desire to overcome national humiliations endured since the breakup of the Soviet Union. On the same day, the *Times* published another article meant to cover the US role in preparing the initial Georgian attack (“After Mixed US Messages, a War Erupted in Georgia”) and an anti-Russia guest op-ed piece (“Russia Blames the Victim”). The *Los Angeles Times* featured a column entitled “Stand up to Russia.” On August 13, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote an editorial condemning Bush’s “lethargy” in responding to Russia (“Bush and Georgia”).

The media propaganda campaign deployed several buzzwords aimed at poisoning public opinion. For example, the word “blitz”—meant to conjure up images of the German Wehrmacht’s “blitzkrieg” invasions of Europe in World War Two—suddenly made its way into the airwaves and print. A *Google News* search reveals that the word had not appeared in a major news source prior to August 10.

Now, Russia’s air campaign, which, in fact, resulted in few civilian deaths, was regularly referred to as a “bombing blitz” or “air blitz.” Needless to say, the media uses entirely different words to describe the

much larger and more deadly US aerial bombardments of Iraq, Yugoslavia, and other countries—words like “precision,” “surgical” and “smart bomb.”

Other buzzwords that rapidly made their way into the daily lexicon of the US media beginning on August 10: various forms of the word “aggression” in defining Russia; the words “massive” and “disproportionate” to describe Russia’s incursion (less than 15,000 soldiers, or about one tenth the number of US troops who continue to occupy Iraq); the words “assault” and “attack,” used earlier to describe Georgia’s operations against South Ossetia, were now routinely applied to Russia’s retaliation; “democracy” and “democratic” began to appear with much greater frequency in describing Georgia.

The major cable news networks—Fox, CNN and MSNBC—are particularly adept at this sort of word game. They are also skilled at manipulating visual images to support their chosen slant. A Russian cameraman has accused CNN of using film footage of destroyed buildings that he took in the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali and presenting it to an American audience as evidence of Russian atrocities in the Georgian city of Gori.

In its day-to-day operations, the US media displays a combination of disdain and ignorance of history, particularly when that history reveals uncomfortable truths about the origins of current events. However, when the chance to confuse and terrify readers and viewers presents itself, the mainstream media is quite ready to invoke some bogus history lesson against whatever country has run afoul of US imperialism.

A favorite historical theme trotted out again and again is “appeasement,” which is meant to conjure up images of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain crumbling before Hitler at Munich in 1938, and thus preparing the way for World War Two. Such a presentation of the historical episode itself is grossly oversimplified. But more to the point, it is used to swing public opinion behind the idea that the US and the world must adopt the most belligerent and violent stance toward whatever nation Washington has defined, at any given time, as a “rogue state,” “axis of evil” member, or “aggressor.” Hence, the US media currently bristles with warnings against “appeasing” the Russian Bear.

Some lessons of history the US media prefers not to address. The media does not square Washington’s condemnation of the “illegal” Russian invasion of Georgia with the infinitely more destructive US invasion and occupation of Iraq. As predatory as Russia’s aims may be, it certainly can lay claim with more credibility to a “security” interest in a neighboring country, formerly part of the Soviet Union, that is openly hostile to it.

All the threadbare rationales for the US invasion of Iraq, on the other hand, have long since been exposed. The media makes no effort, moreover, to square Washington’s support for the “territorial integrity” of Georgia with its own war only 10 years ago against Serbia in support of Kosovan separatists, in which the infrastructure of Serbia was destroyed and its capital bombed. One could draw up an endless list of such examples of rank hypocrisy.



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