

The New York Times and the mystery missile

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The *New York Times* carried its first article Monday on what appeared to be an unexplained missile launch off the coast of southern California. The article, buried at the bottom of page 16, came a full week after the event itself.

While the spectacular video of a giant contrail off the coast of southern California was shown by all of the major television networks, and the story was widely covered in most of the media, the *Times* maintained a discreet silence.

The article that finally appeared on November 15, entitled “How Smoky Plume in Sky Drew the Eyes of the World”, was more of a whimsical background piece than a hard news story.

Tucked within its fourth paragraph was the Pentagon’s vague explanation—delivered two days after the filming of the apparent missile launch by a television station helicopter—that “there is no evidence to suggest that this is anything other than a condensation trail from an aircraft.” This is followed by the *Times*’ observation: “Some experts chastised media outlets for running with a half-baked, whole-hyped story.”

The only expert cited was John E. Pike, the director of GlobalSecurity.org, who offered an interesting explanation for the prolonged silence of the US military in the face of media demands for an explanation of the massive plume over the Pacific.

“I think it temporarily confused the Pentagon,” said Pike. “They had to triple-check to see if they actually did have something going on out there, to see if there was some black [top secret] program they should not talk about.”

This explanation of the Pentagon’s silence could be applied with equal validity to that of the *New York Times* itself. Either it suspected, or it knew, that there was something involved that it should not talk about.

When it comes to issues of “national security”—that is, the secret operations and crimes of the US military-intelligence apparatus—the *New York Times* will not be counted among those “chastised” for irresponsible journalism.

On the contrary, it has a well-established *modus operandi*, which was undoubtedly employed in relation to the mystery missile story. The paper’s motto, “All the news that’s fit to print” has been amended in practice to read “All the news deemed fit to print after consultation with the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA.”

This approach was certainly in evidence in relation to the greatest exposure of state secrets in the recent period, the release of the Afghanistan and Iraq documents by WikiLeaks.

In the case of the Afghanistan documents, the editors of the *Times* cleared its coverage in advance with both the White House and the Pentagon, earning the praise of both for its “responsible” journalism. This responsibility was manifested in a deliberate effort to bury the revelations contained in the mass of military logs on the killing of Afghan civilians and other war crimes. The paper even served as a conduit for the US government’s demand that WikiLeaks remove the primary documents from its web site.

In explaining its decision to report on the Iraq war logs made public by WikiLeaks, the newspaper’s public editor, Arthur S. Brisbane, said that, despite its

disdain for the work of WikiLeaks, it had decided to “use its resources to organize and filter material that was going public, one way or another.”

In other words, if it had been up to the *Times* editors, the secret documents would have never seen the light of day. Given that they were going to be made public, the newspaper volunteered its services in presenting them in a manner that would be least damaging to the interests of the US ruling elite.

Six years earlier, the supposed newspaper of record rendered similar services to the administration of George W. Bush. At the request of the White House, it suppressed for over a year a story exposing the National Security Agency’s secret and illegal domestic spying operation, which placed telephone conversations and emails of American citizens under surveillance. *Times* editor Bill Keller, who personally went to the White House to discuss the story, agreed with others in the paper’s top management to withhold it until after the November 2004 presidential election, an action which may well have proved decisive in giving Bush a second term.

The *Times*’ prolonged silence on the missile story—which echoed the disturbing silence of the Pentagon itself—was in all probability the product of discussions between the paper’s editors and senior military and political officials. The decision was taken to wait until the proper authorities had come up with a plausible explanation.

Both the extraordinary length of this delay in covering the story, as well as the content of the article itself, make clear that this plausible explanation has not been forthcoming.

The Pentagon’s announcement that it was “satisfied” that what appeared to many scientists and experts on missile technology to have been the launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile was nothing more than the contrail (condensation trail) of a jet airplane was less than convincing.

The military has yet to explain why it took two days to reach this conclusion, and why, if this is indeed the

case, it is unable to specify what airplane produced the contrail. With the vast amounts of money that are poured into multiple agencies—the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM), the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and others—to monitor US airspace, it is inconceivable that such information would be unavailable.

The most interesting information contained in the *Times* article came from Gil Leyvas, the photojournalist who shot the video of what the paper acknowledges “looked to him like the launching of a missile.”

According to the *Times*: “Mr. Leyvas said there were two copies of the unedited videotape of the Nov. 8 contrail, one that he has and one at the station. He and Scott Diener, the news director at KCBS, said there had been no effort by any government entity to obtain the unedited videotape, perhaps as part of an investigation into the incident.”

“The media are the only people begging for the video,” Diener told the *Times*.

In other words, there has been no investigation of the incident by the military, the civilian authorities or anyone in positions of governmental authority. What this suggests is that elements within the military and intelligence apparatus know very well what caused the plume and have no need to conduct such a probe. The airplane contrail explanation would appear to be not the product of objective evidence, but rather a useful alibi.

The original and highly disturbing questions raised by this incident remain in full force. Is the US military in control of its nuclear forces? And is the Obama administration in control of the military?



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