

# The New York Times and CIA killer Raymond Davis

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The *New York Times* on Sunday published a column by its public editor, Arthur S. Brisbane, defending the newspaper's decision to withhold, at the request of the Obama administration, the fact that CIA killer Raymond Davis is an employee of the US spy agency.

Whatever Brisbane's intentions, the column is a self-indictment, exposing the liberal newspaper of record's lack of any sense of democratic responsibility or fidelity to basic journalistic principles and its role as a quasi-state propaganda organ.

On January 27 Davis, a former US Special Forces soldier and Xe Services (previously called Blackwater) mercenary, shot and killed two Pakistani youth in broad daylight while driving through a crowded market in Lahore. Other CIA operatives who raced to the scene in their vehicle to prevent Pakistani officials from arresting Davis struck a third man and fled, leaving their victim to die in the street.

The following day, Pakistani authorities arrested Davis and charged him with murder and carrying an unlicensed gun. The US government demanded, and continues to demand, Davis' release to American officials on the grounds that he is an official with the US embassy in Islamabad and enjoys diplomatic immunity. The Obama administration denied charges by Pakistani officials that Davis is a CIA operative.

The killings and the US response have outraged Pakistani public opinion, sparking ongoing protests in Lahore and elsewhere around the country.

Although the *Times* was aware of Davis' CIA connections, it not only concealed them in its coverage, it acceded to a State Department request that it not report Pakistani charges that Davis was linked to the CIA. Only after the British *Guardian* on February 20 published a report on Davis' ties to the CIA did the *Times*, the following day, acknowledge the fact.

In the *Times'* February 21 story, which explained that Davis' activities were part of an expanding CIA-led spy operation in Pakistan, the newspaper reported that it had withheld information on Davis' CIA connections at the behest of the US government.

Brisbane's February 27 column begins with excerpts from the letters of three readers denouncing the *Times* for colluding with the government to conceal the truth. "Yet again," reads one of the letters, "the NYT has shown itself to be a willing pawn of the government's propaganda ministry."

The public editor makes clear that he is writing in response to an outpouring of anger over the newspaper's self-censorship, noting that it has "kicked up a powerful response, some of it as bitterly critical as these readers' comments."

In fact, the *Times* has no credibility among those who follow international developments. Informed readers can only assume that what is published has been cleared with the State Department, the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies.

Brisbane recounts that on February 8, State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley contacted the *Times*. He quotes Executive Editor Bill Keller as saying, "He was asking us not to speculate or recycle charges in the Pakistani press. His concern was that the letters C-I-A in an article in the NYT, even as speculation, would be taken as authoritative and would be a red flag in Pakistan."

Keller is unabashed in acknowledging that he works on behalf of the government to manage and filter the flow of information to the public.

"Mr. Crowley told me the United States was concerned about Mr. Davis' safety while in Pakistani custody," Brisbane writes. This ostensible concern for the safety of intelligence operatives and sources has become a catchall rationale for suppressing information the government wants to conceal from the public. In its name, the *New York Times* along with most of the US media has demonized WikiLeaks and its cofounder Julian Assange.

It is a convenient and all-embracing pretext for concealing the activities of US intelligence and military operatives, since, by the very nature of what they do, such people place their lives at risk. By accepting responsibility for their security, the *Times* becomes their accomplice—providing the

equivalent of a journalistic getaway car.

After noting that other major media organizations, including the Associated Press and the *Washington Post*, also acceded to the government's request to hide Davis' CIA ties, Brisbane admits that even after the *Guardian* exposé, the *Times* complied with a State Department appeal for it to delay for a day its own article.

Having outlined this sordid history, Brisbane writes: "As profoundly unpalatable as it is, I think the *Times* did the only thing it could do."

There follows a sophistic and semi-coherent exposition on the supposed tension between revealing government secrets and "saving lives." Behind his uncritical parroting of the government line on jeopardizing Davis' safety is the unstated support of Brisbane and the *Times* for US intelligence operations around the world—which are uniformly directed at advancing the interests of the American corporate-financial elite and supporting repressive client regimes.

The depth of indifference toward the plight of the masses who suffer as a result of the predations of US-backed despots or directly at the hands of the American military—in Pakistan—is stark. In his concern for the safety of a professional killer, Brisbane seems to place little or no value on the lives of ordinary Pakistanis—or Iraqis, Afghans, Yemenis, etc.

It never occurs to him to ponder how many Pakistani lives will be lost if CIA murderers like Davis are allowed to kill with impunity.

Brisbane approvingly quotes author and *Washington Post* Associate Editor Bob Woodward, who, while noting that the Davis affair is "just the 'tip of the iceberg' of intensive secret warfare the United States is waging in the region, " concludes that "you just don't want to get someone killed," and declares, "humanitarian considerations first, journalism second."

As though the US government campaign to free Davis—whose trial could provide explosive testimony about US conspiracies and provocations in Pakistan and elsewhere—is a humanitarian effort!

Brisbane then admits that the *Times*' suppression of Davis' CIA connections necessarily led to inaccurate and misleading reporting. He writes: "For nearly two weeks, the *Times* tried to report on the Davis affair while sealing off the CIA connection. In practice, this meant its stories contained material that, in the cold light of retrospect, seems very misleading."

Brisbane even quotes the chairman of the journalism department at Emerson College, Ted Gup, who explains that the suppression of Davis' CIA connections involves a basic falsification because that issue is at the heart of the legal and

political issues surrounding the case. "In this instance," Gup says, "his affiliation might help explain what transpired. In other words, you may not be able to tell this story without identifying him as agency or agency support."

Thus, even from the standpoint of sheer journalistic ethics, leaving aside political or moral considerations, the *Times* admits that it violated any fidelity to objectivity and engaged in public misinformation at the request of the state. There could be no clearer definition of a controlled press, except that in the US there is no need for state compulsion. The establishment media sees itself as an instrument of the government and willingly censors itself.

"How can a news outlet stay credible when readers learn later that it has concealed what it knows?" Brisbane asks. How indeed?!

Brisbane passes seamlessly from this dilemma to a reassertion of the correctness of the *Times*' suppression of the facts. He quotes the newspaper's Washington bureau chief, Dean Baquet, as saying: "I would argue that, given the restriction [only a mere restriction!], we tried our best not to be misleading... I don't regret the judgment not to identify further. These are hard calls."

They may be hard calls, but the *Times* has plenty of practice making them, inasmuch as it routinely vets its reporting with the government and suppresses stories ranging from domestic spying to US war crimes around the world.

Brisbane concludes that "to have handled [the Davis story] otherwise would have been simply reckless. I'd call this a no-win situation, one that reflects the limits of responsible journalism in the theater of secret war."

Responsible to whom? Certainly not to the people of the United States or the world. With this cynical attempt at self-justification, the *Times* only clarifies that it, along with the rest of the establishment press, is responsible to the American capitalist class and its state.



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