

New York Times' Keller on Iraq: The confession of a "liberal" hawk

Bill Van Auken
15 September 2011

Bill Keller, who gave up his post as executive editor of the *New York Times* this month, used the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks to publish a lengthy apology for his support of the Bush administration's March 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Entitled, "My Unfinished 9/11 Business: A Hard Look at Why I Wanted War," the four-page spread in the newspaper's Sunday magazine section fails to deliver on its promise. Rather than a "hard look," he presents a pathetic alibi based upon his own "feelings" in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks and those of a whole political and social milieu of former liberals and ex-lefts.

One of Keller's principal defenses is that he was part of a "large and estimable group" of pundits, which he thought of as the "I Can't Believe I'm a Hawk Club." Those he includes in this category, among others, are the *Times*' Thomas Friedman, Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*'s George Packer and Jeffrey Goldberg, Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*, Andrew Sullivan, Paul Berman and Christopher Hitchens.

Establishing the self-absorbed tone that predominates throughout the piece, Keller begins by lamenting that the 9/11 commemorations honored only the victims and the heroism of first responders, while failing to memorialize the "feelings" that he and his peers experienced that day: "the bewilderment, the vulnerability, the impotence."

This last "feeling" is a thread that runs throughout Keller's essay. In the aftermath of 9/11, he tells us, his "prudent punditry soon felt inadequate."

He blames his transformation into a war hawk in part on the birth of his daughter, saying that the urge "to do something—to prove something—was overriding a career-long schooling in the virtues of caution and skepticism."

On the brink of the war, Keller says he was unable to grasp the arguments against it because he and other erstwhile liberals "were still a little drugged by testosterone. And maybe a little too pleased with ourselves for standing up to evil and defying the caricature of liberals as, to borrow a phrase from those days, brie-eating surrender monkeys."

Is it credible that after all these years, Keller, the son of a former Chevron CEO, thinks it was all about testosterone, when everybody else knows it was all about oil? The three-letter word does not merit a mention.

Finally, he acknowledges that in hindsight the war against Iraq was "a monumental blunder," but claims, "Whether it was wrong to support the invasion at the time is a harder call." On balance, he concludes that he could have seen through the Bush administration's rationale for the war had he "looked hard enough." He didn't do so, he says, because "I wanted to be on the side of doing something, and standing by was not enough."

Taken as a whole, Keller's confession is both infuriating and pathetic. One would hardly guess from the solipsistic fixation on his feelings that he is writing about a war that claimed the lives of over a million Iraqis, killed over 4,000 US military personnel and left tens of thousands of soldiers maimed and wounded. All of these victims, like his daughter, had parents who wanted to protect them. Unlike the executive editor of the *New York Times*, however, their feelings counted for nothing.

While playing no small part in foisting this illegal war onto the American people, Keller himself has not suffered in the slightest for this "monumental blunder." Not surprisingly, not a few of the readers' online responses to his piece questioned why it did not include his resignation.

But, of course, Keller is part of a social layer for whom accountability is virtually unknown. In 2005, it was reported that the *Times* executive editor was taking in an annual salary of \$650,000, placing him squarely in the top 1 percent, where the resurgence of imperialist militarism finds its principal constituency.

Much of what Keller writes is grossly self-serving, if not simply dishonest.

Justifying his support for the war, he states, "We forget how broad the consensus was that Hussein was hiding the kind of weapons that could rain holocaust on a neighbor or be delivered to America by proxy."

If there is selective memory at work, it is Keller's. Hans Blix, the head of the UN weapons inspection agency, Mohammed ElBaradei, the chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Scott Ritter, the former chief UN weapons inspector, all insisted that there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Moreover, the very conception of "consensus" applies only to Keller and his fellow well-paid pundits, together with the ruling elite they serve. Masses of people all over the world rejected the claims of an Iraqi threat and marched in their tens of millions in February 2003, barely a month before the invasion. Presumably, Keller saw from his window at the *New York Times* building the more than half-a-million-strong crowd that filled the streets of New York City on February 15 to oppose the war. The *Times* did its best to conceal the scope and significance of these demonstrations.

Perhaps the most deceitful passage in Keller's piece is the following: "... when the troops went in, they went with my blessing. Of course I don't think President Bush was awaiting permission from the *New York Times's* Op-Ed page—or, for that matter, from my friends in the *Times* newsroom, who during the prewar debate published some notoriously credulous stories about Iraqi weapons. The administration, however, was clearly pleased to cite the liberal hawks as evidence that invading Iraq was not just the impetuous act of cowboy neocons."

Such false modesty! The *Times*, with its reputation as the "newspaper of record," as undeserved as it may be, played a crucial role in the political and ideological preparation of the war against Iraq.

Keller discretely omits the names of his "friends" in the newsroom, though presumably the reference is to Judith Miller, who, in league with administration officials and right-wing think tanks, systematically promulgated the lies about WMD. Nor does he mention the role of Thomas Friedman, the paper's chief foreign affairs columnist, who produced column after column justifying what he happily called a "war of choice" against Iraq in the name of democracy, human rights and oil.

What Keller writes about the Bush administration's use of the "liberal hawks" at the *Times* to justify the war is only the tip of the iceberg. The reality is that the newspaper played a huge role in setting the tone for the American media as a whole. In the run-up to the Iraq war, this tone was one of jingoistic propaganda.

Keller's confession about how his feelings led him astray is hardly believable. The editor of the *Times* was not some naive new parent, driven to support war by his uncontrollable emotions after 9/11. He knew damn well what he was doing.

The ties between the senior editors of the *Times* and the administration in Washington are far closer than he lets on. This has become manifest in the period since the invasion of Iraq, with

Keller's own decision—made at the request of the Bush White House—to suppress the story exposing the massive NSA domestic spying operation until after the 2004 presidential election. More recently, there has been the coordinated vetting of secret cables released by WikiLeaks, in which *Times* personnel have sought pre-publication approval from the White House and the CIA.

Is it so far-fetched to think that similar consultations may have taken place over the development of the newspaper's reporting and editorial line relating to the buildup to war in Iraq?

Toward the end of his column, Keller notes that the "last big story to break" while he was the *Times* executive editor was the war on Libya. Here, he boasts, the "president, public and press" all "picked our way more carefully through the mess." In his own case, he credits this supposedly changed approach to "the costly wisdom of Iraq."

This "wisdom" appears to consist of learning how to better cover your tracks. In Libya, just as in Iraq, the *Times* trumpeted the official pretext—"protecting civilians"—while supporting a war of aggression for "regime change," i.e., installing a pliant puppet state to assure unfettered control over Libya's oil wealth. So enthused was the *Times* over this new "humanitarian" war that it used its editorials to pitch bloodier military tactics, including the use of US AC-130 flying gunships to annihilate any Libyans resisting NATO's conquest.

Keller's confession only exposes the intellectual and moral bankruptcy that he shares with the whole layer of liberals and ex-lefts who have dedicated themselves to churning out "democratic" and "humanitarian" justifications for imperialist aggression. In the end, their role in relation to the Iraq war was no better than that of the countless petty-bourgeois scribblers who came up with justifications for the crimes of the Nazis.

Keller writes: "President Bush got it wrong. And so did I." No, the actions taken by Bush and company in Iraq constitute war crimes, not mistakes. And the role played by Keller in promoting this illegal war makes him, at the very least, an accomplice and facilitator of war crimes.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact