

# New York Times' Bill Keller sets ground rules for next war

Bill Van Auken  
21 March 2012

On the ninth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, *New York Times* columnist and former editor Bill Keller has penned a self-serving piece that obscures his own role in justifying that war, while setting ground rules for launching the next one.

Keller's headline—"Falling in and out of war"—is an accurate reflection of the smug and cynical character of the well-heeled layer of establishment liberals of which he is a part, and which today constitutes a principal constituency for imperialism.

"When you've been wrong about something as important as war, as I have, you owe yourself some hard thinking about how to avoid repeating the mistake," Keller begins his column. "And if that's true for a mere kibitzing columnist, it's immeasurably more true for those in a position to actually start a war."

Keller the "mere kibitzing columnist"? Such modesty! One would hardly imagine that when he was "wrong about something as important as war" he was the executive editor of the *Times*, taking in an annual salary of \$650,000 and directing one of the most powerful opinion manufacturing organizations in the United States.

The former editor says next to nothing about how he got it wrong in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, nor why he now believes it was a mistake to support that war, outside of an aside that it "distracted our attention and energy from the far more important undertaking in Afghanistan."

He is even less inclined to dwell on the implications of his getting it wrong: the death, wounding and forced exile of millions of Iraqis, the decimation of an entire society, and the killing of over 4,000 US troops, along with the maiming of tens of thousands of others.

Any serious examination of the record of the Iraq war inevitably points to the indispensable role of the *Times*

and its editor, Keller, in selling the lies used to justify the war to the American public. This wasn't a matter of "kibitzing" columns, but a sustained exercise in disinformation, in which the newspaper and its correspondent Judith Miller made the case that the regime in Baghdad was developing "weapons of mass destruction" and that war was necessary. Editorial after editorial and column after column continued a drumbeat justifying war. As the "newspaper of record" and a voice of official liberalism, the *Times* was cited by the Bush White House in making the case for invading Iraq, and it set the tone for the entire national media.

Now, in the face of new threats of war against Syria and Iran, Keller poses a series of questions that would supposedly guard against "getting it wrong" once again.

The first question he poses is: "How is this our fight?" He asserts that in the case of the Afghanistan war "the answer is obvious." He cites a "broad agreement that it was in America's vital national interest in 2001 to go after the homicidal zealots behind the 9/11 attacks on America."

Really? If that was the case, why didn't the Bush administration order the military into Saudi Arabia, from which 15 of the 19 men accused of the 9/11 hijacking came, along with ideological inspiration, funding and logistical support for the operation? Why some "zealots" were targeted for elimination and others protected was bound up not with any "broad agreement," but with the geo-strategic interests of US imperialism—in particular, for control of oil, a three-letter word that makes no appearance in Keller's column.

Keller declares that the Afghanistan war was "as the cops say, a righteous shoot." The cops do use this

phrase, sometimes when describing the fatal shooting of a man seen reaching for a gun that turns out to be a wallet. The underlying assumption is that the United States is the world's policeman, with a license to use deadly force whenever and wherever it sees fit.

Other questions that Keller says need asking include what the war will cost (Libya was an easy target; Syria is harder), what alternatives exist (he favorably cites Obama's war threats against Iran as a supposed means of restraining Israel), who else supports the war ("in these optional wars, it is useful to have company"), and what are the potential unintended consequences.

One question is entirely missing. He does not bother to ask: is the war legal? "Optional wars," as Keller delicately describes them, are, in the language of international law, wars of aggression.

The Nuremberg Military Tribunal, which tried the surviving leaders of Hitler's Third Reich, described such a war as "essentially an evil thing." It declared that "to initiate a war of aggression... is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

The United Nations Charter, to which Washington is a signatory, commits member states to "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

Such considerations are of no interest to Keller and fellow "liberal" supporters of imperialism. Having licked the wounds to their vanity and reputations inflicted by the debacle in Iraq, they are now gearing up to back new wars being prepared by a Democratic president on the same pretexts of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and human rights utilized by his Republican predecessor.

In his utter disregard for international law, Keller expresses the essential criminality of US foreign policy.

He closes his column with the invocation: "If Iraq taught us nothing else, it should have taught us this: Before you deploy the troops, deploy the fact checkers."

Is this meant to be ironic? Wasn't it the ostensible role of the *New York Times* and what was once known as the "fourth estate" to challenge the government's monopoly of information and question the supposed

"facts" used to justify war?

If Iraq taught us anything, it is that under conditions of the explosive growth of American militarism, unprecedented social inequality and a relentless attack on democratic rights, the corporate-controlled media plays the role of the servile mouthpiece of the government. Today, having learned nothing, it is regurgitating and embellishing upon official lies to construct the justifications for an even more devastating war to further the aims of US imperialism.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**