

The New York Times' Bill Keller smears Bradley Manning

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On February 28, at his pretrial hearing at Fort Meade, Maryland, Private Bradley Manning revealed that before releasing government files to WikiLeaks, he contacted major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, in an effort to pass on the documents in his possession. Manning did so, he explained, because the files contained “some of the most significant documents of our time, removing the fog of war and revealing the true nature of 21st century asymmetric warfare.” These files exposed government crimes and atrocities, including the deliberate murder of civilians by the US military.

Manning called contact numbers listed on the *Times* web site and left a message explaining the nature of the material along with his phone number and Skype information. He never received a response.

Attempting to justify the *Times*' unprincipled role in the events leading up to Manning's arrest, Bill Keller, who was executive editor when Manning tried to contact the paper, wrote a column on March 10, “Bradley Manning's Confidant.”

In it, Keller implausibly blames the *Times*' failure to return Manning's call on the soldier, asking why Manning “couldn't figure out how to get an email or phone message to an editor at the *Times*.” He then asks, “What if he had succeeded in delivering his pilfered documents to *The Times*? What would be different, for Manning and the rest of us?”

Keller continues, “First of all, I can say with some confidence that *The Times* would have done exactly what it did with the archive when it was supplied to us via WikiLeaks: assigned journalists to search for material of genuine public interest, taken pains to omit information that might get troops in the field or innocent informants killed, and published our reports with a flourish. The documents would have made news—big news.”

Keller is contradicted by his own record. His past actions and writings exhibit an openly hostile attitude to those who “leak” information, hardly different from that of a CIA operative. His derogatory description of the documents that Manning sought to make available to the *Times* as “pilfered” —i.e., stolen—expresses his personal disdain for the WikiLeaks revelations made possible by Manning.

Keller never concealed his anger over the fact that WikiLeaks more or less forced the *Times* to publish information that it

would have preferred to suppress. On November 29, 2010, as the newspaper began its reluctant reporting on select WikiLeaks material, Keller wrote that he was “uncomfortable” with the notion that the *Times* had the power to “decide to release information that the government wants to keep secret.”

If this “power”—that is, the ability to expose government secrets—makes Keller uncomfortable, one might ask, why did he become a journalist? Clearly, Keller does not conceive of the *Times* as part of a “Fourth Estate,” a press independent of the state. It is for Keller, rather, a Fourth Branch of government.

Keller's statements were those of a man who identifies himself entirely with the state. “We have as much at stake in the war against terror as anyone... When we find ourselves in possession of government secrets, we think long and hard about whether to disclose them,” Keller wrote at the time.

In a remarkable statement of the *Times*' editorial philosophy, Keller declared: “We agree wholeheartedly that transparency is not an absolute good... Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity.” (See: “The New York Times and WikiLeaks”)

These words constitute a devastating self-exposure of Keller's antidemocratic mentality. For him, the government's need for secrecy takes precedence over the public's right to know. The *Times*' default mode is to suppress potentially sensitive information. As Keller wrote, release of such information is only authorized by the *Times* after “extensive and serious discussions with the government.”

Keller's view of the press as the reliable co-custodian of state secrets would qualify him to serve as the chief editor of a newspaper published under the rule of a military dictatorship.

Given his lack of any understanding of, let alone commitment to, freedom of the press, Keller's claim that the *Times* would have published Manning's revelations “with a flourish” lacks all credibility. Far more likely, Keller would have informed his government contacts of the information that had come into the *Times*' possession, sought their direction on how to proceed, and exercised the *Times*' “freedom not to publish.”

It is notable that the former editor does not say what constitutes “genuine public interest.” The documents Manning offered the paper included the “Collateral Murder” video that shows US military helicopters gunning down Iraqi civilians,

including children, journalists and first responders. Other documents made clear that the US vastly underreported civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, Keller comments that Manning's offer was "not so much documentation of a particular government outrage as a chance to fish in a sea of secrets."

What is the significance of this distinction? The *Times* might be willing to report on a "particular government outrage" in a manner that suggests that the act in question was an exceptional incident. However, the "sea of secrets" comprises a vast number of outrages that expose the essential criminal character of "war on terror" in which the *Times*, as Keller has stated, "has as much a stake...as anyone."

Keller continues his column in the *Times* with a barely veiled attack on Manning's character. He describes the soldier as "a gay man in an institution not hospitable to gays, fragile, lonely, a little pleased with his own cleverness, a little vague about his motives." Keller speculates that "the court's judgment of the leaker [i.e., Manning] might be colored by the fact that he delivered the goods to a group of former hackers with an outlaw sensibility and an antipathy toward American interests."

Behind this loaded language stands Keller's acceptance of the legitimacy of the "war on terror," and every violation of international law and the US Constitution that has attended it, in which the crimes of the state and the ruling class are subsumed under the all-embracing phrase of "American interests." The *Times* played a key role in promoting the lies the Bush administration used to justify invading Afghanistan and Iraq. Through *Times* reporter Judith Miller, the paper served as a conduit for false charges against Iraq about weapons of mass destruction.

Manning explained his motivation quite explicitly in his court statement. "I had information that needed to be shared with the world," he said, adding, "The information would help document the true cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Keller sneers at Manning's act of conscience: "Was this sense of mission there from the start, or was it shaped afterward by the expectations of the Free Bradley Manning enthusiasts? The answer would probably make no difference to the court. But it might help determine history's verdict."

In fact, the WikiLeaks case has already rendered a historical verdict on Keller, who does not fare well.

Keller detests the "sense of mission" with which Manning sought to act upon democratic principles. He implies the soldier is grandstanding in court and deserving of whatever sentence he may receive. Keller—wealthy, small-minded, and implicated in immense historical crimes—is organically incapable of understanding a man like Manning.

Keller's record is that of a security bureaucrat who has never entertained a single subversive thought and has no tolerance for a press independent of the government. The son of a founding executive of Chevron Oil Corporation, Keller quickly ascended the media ladder after graduating from the private Pomona

College in 1970. A committed anticommunist, he became the paper's Moscow bureau chief in 1986, where he stayed until the collapse of the USSR. After stints in Johannesburg and as foreign and then managing editor, he became the paper's executive editor in 2003, when he championed the war in Iraq. In 2004, he decided to sit on revelations of the Bush administration's warrantless wiretapping activities until Bush was safely reelected.

In 1971, the *Times* played an important role in exposing the lies and crimes surrounding the Vietnam War when it published the Pentagon Papers. These were secret documents revealing the US government's illegal escalation of the Vietnam War into Cambodia and Laos, its coastal raids against North Vietnam, and a record of US government lying about the war. This helped discredit the government's policies and fuel popular opposition to the war.

In his op-ed, Keller briefly refers to this event, but only to declare that the *Times* made sure Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg "knew upfront that he was on his own."

Keller's attempt to invoke the *Times*' role in publishing the Pentagon Papers, while he attacks Manning and opposes publishing government secrets, is dishonest and absurd. His arguments today are precisely the opposite of those the *New York Times* made to defend its decision to publish the Pentagon Papers against a lawsuit by the Nixon administration, insisting it had the right to publish state "secrets."

Keller's column echoes instead the Nixon administration's arguments against the *Times*—that the government "cannot operate its foreign policy in the best interests of the American people if it cannot deal with foreign powers in a confidential way."

Today, Keller and the rest of the corporate media act not on behalf of the public's right to know, but as a gatekeeper to vet material and collaborate with the state. This is the fundamental reason why the *Times* would not publish Manning's material, and Manning was compelled to turn to WikiLeaks to expose the crimes of the US government.



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