

The New York Times and freedom of the press

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An extraordinary commentary published in the *New York Times Book Review*—posted online May 22, scheduled for print publication June 8—asserts that the US government must be the final decision-maker on whether leaked information about government wrongdoing should be published by the press.

This antidemocratic screed, worthy of any police state, is written by Michael Kinsley, a longtime fixture of the punditry establishment and the former co-host of CNN’s “Crossfire” program. His commentary takes the form of a review of Glenn Greenwald’s new book *No Place to Hide* on the Edward Snowden revelations about illegal mass surveillance by the National Security Agency.

Kinsley ridicules Greenwald’s claim that blanket NSA surveillance of electronic communications is a threat to the democratic rights of the American people, and that Snowden was justified in exposing government criminality by leaking documents to Greenwald and other journalists for eventual publication in the *Guardian* (US) and the *Washington Post*.

He sums up as follows: “The question is who decides. It seems clear, at least to me, that the private companies that own newspapers, and their employees, should not have the final say over the release of government secrets, and a free pass to make them public with no legal consequences. In a democracy (which, pace Greenwald, we still are), *that decision must ultimately be made by the government ... Someone gets to decide, and that someone cannot be Glenn Greenwald*” (emphasis added).

Kinsley directly repudiates the idea that the media should function independently of the state. The concept that a fundamental role of journalists is to expose official secrets and lies is totally alien to him. His is a deeply authoritarian conception.

It is the state that should decide what the people know and what they don’t know. It is the state that should determine what is in their best interests. The inexorable logic of this position is to arrogate to the state unlimited powers over the populace.

If the Kinsley rule had been in effect at the time Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, the *Times* and the *Washington Post* would have been barred from publishing their accounts of the long preparations for war in Vietnam and the lies told by the government to conceal them. Countless crimes against democratic rights and international law would have been covered up on the basis that the “decision must ultimately be made by the government.”

While this statement appears in a book review, it is not merely the opinion of the individual reviewer, but carries the political imprimatur of the *Times*, the so-called “newspaper of record,” which sets the agenda for the television networks and the bulk of the US media.

The appearance of the review is evidently the product of a high-level editorial decision. Only ten days before Kinsley’s commentary appeared online, the *Times* published a review of *No Place to Hide* by one of its regular book reviewers, Michio Kakutani. She expressed considerable sympathy for Greenwald’s critique of the surveillance state, noting that over the past 40 years “the NSA’s ability to spy on our daily lives has grown exponentially to Orwellian proportions.” At the same time, she flatly rejected Greenwald’s criticisms of the corporate-controlled media, describing his exposures of the media’s subservience to the military and intelligence agencies as “gross generalizations” that “do a terrible disservice.”

Someone, evidently with considerable influence at

the *Times*, wanted a stronger and more direct assault on Greenwald and Snowden, and commissioned Kinsley to write a second, completely gratuitous, review, knowing what his “take” on the book would be. As a former editor for 20 years of the *New Republic*, the voice of the right wing of the Democratic Party, his pro-government views are no secret.

More fundamentally, the views expressed by Kinsley dovetail completely with those advanced by the editors of the *Times* over the course of the past decade, as the newspaper has integrated itself ever more deeply into the military-intelligence apparatus.

The *Times* has not played a neutral role in the events described in Greenwald’s book. When one of the NSA domestic spying programs was first uncovered by reporters at the *Times* in 2004, the editors blocked publication of the story. This was shortly before the 2004 presidential election, when news that the Bush administration was illegally spying on the American people might have affected the outcome. Executive Editor Bill Keller, after meetings with Bush and NSA officials, killed the story.

The newspaper finally published the story late in 2005, but only after the writer, James Risen, threatened to take his material to a book publisher instead.

Keller subsequently defended his decision to prevent the public from learning about the illegal NSA spying with the following memorable words: “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.”

In other words, “freedom of the press” means the freedom of the corporate-owned media to participate as a partner with the government in the buildup of police state repression against working people and the preparations for imperialist war all over the world.

The *Times* has repeatedly demonstrated a visceral hatred for those who expose the crimes of US imperialism, vilifying WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, dismissing the significance of the documents leaked by Chelsea (Bradley) Manning on US atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now attacking both Snowden and Greenwald.

Kinsley’s views on press freedom are an expression of the decay of what was once referred to as the “Fourth Estate” in America. He speaks for an entire

social layer of well-heeled pundits who have been integrated into the financial aristocracy. (Kinsley himself is married to Patti Stonesifer, longtime Microsoft executive and founding CEO of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.)

The degeneration of the media is an expression of the collapse of bourgeois democracy as a whole. The authoritarian conceptions of Kinsley and the *Times* in relation to the role of the media are entirely in line with the authoritarian substance of the secret programs that they, along with the Obama administration and the government as a whole, have sought to conceal from the American people. A government that asserts the right to assassinate citizens without due process and to spy on the population without any legal constraint also assumes for itself the right to decide what the population can and should know.

Bourgeois democracy in America cannot survive the colossal growth of social inequality that permeates all aspects of life in the United States.

The defense of the fundamental constitutional rights that were pioneered by the American Revolution—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly—falls now to the working class. Only the building of a powerful independent political movement of working people, based on a socialist program, can provide a way forward in the defense of democratic rights.



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