

New York Times in crisis over op-ed backing military takeover

Patrick Martin
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The decision by the *New York Times* to publish an op-ed column by Republican Senator Tom Cotton supporting President Trump's call for a military takeover of the United States has produced a political uproar among the newspaper's staff and readers and forced the editorial page editor, James Bennet, to issue a public apology.

There is a lot to apologize for, since Cotton's column was a fascistic diatribe that sought to justify the use of the military to suppress the ongoing mass demonstrations against police violence and brutality, sparked by the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, by four Minneapolis cops.

The column was based on the most flagrant lies, claiming "rioters have plunged many American cities into anarchy," that the police were by and large the victims of protester violence, rather than the other way around, that even after governors have called up the National Guard, in some cases "the rioters still outnumber the police and National Guard combined."

Cotton particularly cited "cadres of left-wing radicals like antifa infiltrating protest marches to exploit Floyd's death for their own anarchic purposes." In fact, however, there is no evidence of any role by the nebulous Antifa in alleged rioting, and not one person arrested on federal charges in the course of any of the protests has been linked to it, although several have been identified as white supremacists engaged in provocations. Even FBI Director Christopher Wray, in congressional testimony three years ago, admitted that the group did not exist as such, saying, "we're not investigating antifa as antifa—that's an ideology, and we don't investigate ideologies."

On the basis of wild and unsupported claims, which smeared hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters as violent rioters, Cotton demanded "an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers." He called for use of the Insurrection Act of 1807 to authorize deployment of the regular military against the protests.

The op-ed appeared on the *Times* website Wednesday night, and then in its Thursday print edition. It provoked

wide opposition among the staff, with more than 800 signing a letter of protest, dozens calling in sick Thursday, and many more planning more public action Friday.

The initial response from Bennet and publisher A. G. Sulzberger was to defend the decision. "I believe in the principle of openness to a range of opinions, even those we may disagree with, and this piece was published in that spirit," Sulzberger wrote in an email to the staff. Bennet claimed that it was important to make the views of public officials known, even if editors disagreed with them. This threadbare justification for printing a piece of fascist propaganda was blown apart, however, when Bennet admitted that he had not even read the op-ed before it was posted on the newspaper's web site.

Late Thursday, Sulzberger reversed himself, and the *Times* issued a statement declaring that the op-ed column did not meet the newspaper's standards because of a "rushed editorial process."

"As a result, we're planning to examine both short-term and long-term changes" to the opinion pages, the statement said.

Press reports from an internal staff meeting indicated that it was the *Times* that solicited Cotton's input, rather than Cotton asking for space on the op-ed page. This is extremely significant, if true, since it was well known in political and media circles that Cotton was the most vehement advocate of using troops to drown the mass protests in blood. In a statement issued Monday, hours before Trump's appearance in the Rose Garden to threaten military force, Cotton called for "No quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters"—in other words, kill them without mercy. Under the Geneva Conventions, giving "no quarter" to enemy combatants is a war crime.

The initial claim by Sulzberger and Bennet that they were merely encouraging public debate over the policies of the Trump administration by publishing Cotton's column is belied by one unambiguous fact: the *Times* has itself not published any editorial on Trump's threat to invoke the Insurrection Act and send troops into major cities—possibly

including New York City—in the four days that have passed since Trump’s six-minute statement in the Rose Garden.

In this, of course, they are in lockstep with the leadership of the Democratic Party, which has also been completely silent about Trump’s open preparations for an unconstitutional mobilization of the military against the American people.

The publication of Cotton’s column thus takes on a different character: it was more of an effort by the *Times*—which is not just a newspaper, but also a multimillion-dollar business—to take out an insurance policy. In the event Trump went forward with his demands for the mobilization of troops all over America, carrying out what would amount to a military coup against the Constitution and democratic rights, the *Times* would be recognized by the newly empowered presidential junta as a potential ally.

Sulzberger, Bennet and Executive Editor Dean Baquet are now backpedaling furiously. They okayed the publication Friday of an op-ed column by Michelle Goldberg that was headlined, “Tom Cotton’s Fascist Op-Ed.” The commentary attacked management’s claim that publication of op-ed columns by Vladimir Putin and Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani had set a precedent that justified publishing Cotton’s. Goldberg noted that Putin and Haqqani’s columns had not been advocating armed attacks on Americans, while “Cotton, by contrast, is calling for what would almost certainly amount to massive violence against his fellow citizens.”

Given the serious blow the op-ed column has given to the newspaper’s claim to be the standard-bearer for liberal public opinion against Trump, and Bennet’s amazing claim that he did not even read the op-ed column before it was published, it would not be surprising if the editor were given his walking papers by publisher Sulzberger.

But Bennet is not just any editor. His brother Michael is a US senator from Colorado. His father was a State Department official in both the Carter and Clinton administrations, and spent three years as the administrator of the Agency for International Development, a longtime instrument of American foreign policy, notorious for its role in CIA covert operations overseas.

The Bennets are part of the permanent national security apparatus, concentrated in New York and Washington, in which individuals shift roles and responsibilities, moving from government to think tanks to editorial positions, but always having as their top duty the defense of the interests of American imperialism.

In the 1970s, that integration was symbolized by the notorious switch in which Leslie Gelb, *Times* foreign correspondent and Democrat, effectively exchanged positions with Richard Burt, *Times* foreign correspondent

and Republican. Gelb had moved from the *Times* to become director of politico-military affairs at the State Department in the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter. When Carter was defeated by Reagan, Burt moved from the *Times* to take over the position Gelb had occupied at the State Department. Gelb replaced Burt at the *Times*.

Today, such figures as op-ed columnist and former foreign correspondent Thomas Friedman and senior correspondents David Sanger and Michael Schmidt play similar roles, acting as direct conduits for the military-intelligence apparatus. It was Friedman, for example, who first issued the slogan, “The cure must not be worse than the disease,” which has become the mantra of the back-to-work campaign in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Sanger and Schmidt have been de facto drop boxes for the views of that section of the national security establishment that is hostile to Trump from the standpoint of demanding a more aggressive approach to Russia and Syria.

The *Times* is a key institution of American imperialism, helping sell the policies through which Wall Street, the Pentagon and CIA pursue the interests of the financial aristocracy, both at home and abroad. It acts as the conductor for what one critic called the “Mighty Wurlitzer” of imperialist propaganda and lies, setting the agenda for the television networks and the regional daily newspapers, and effectively determining much of what the American public reads and views.

Its exposure over the Cotton op-ed provocation only underscores the necessity for building and expanding the influence of the voice of international socialism, the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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