

The record of the *New York Times* on the “war on terror”

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A quarter century after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the events of that day have passed, for many, from memory to history. About one in three Americans alive today was born after the attacks.

With this, the task of the apologists of American imperialism has graduated from propaganda to historical revisionism. The *New York Times*’s editorial board, speaking for the Democratic Party, took up this dirty business in an editorial published Friday. “On this 25th anniversary ... we ask that America face the mistakes that it made,” it wrote.

The “mistakes” it names are the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the torture of prisoners and the mass warrantless surveillance of Americans that “clearly went too far.” “The principal legacy of America’s response,” the *New York Times* wrote, is “two long, bloody wars—one of which, in Iraq, was started on false pretenses—that mostly weakened the United States, at home and abroad.”

The *Times* names “America” as the subject of these “mistakes,” in order to absolve any responsibility of specific actors. With everything dissolved into the nation as a whole, no one can be assigned responsibility, let alone criminal liability.

The phrase “mistakes were made” was made notorious by President Ronald Reagan, who used it in his State of the Union address of January 27, 1987, to cover up the Iran-Contra scandal, the secret sale of weapons to Iran to finance the Nicaraguan Contras: “serious mistakes were made in trying to do so.” The Contras, a force organized and armed by the CIA against Nicaragua’s Sandinista government, killed, tortured and kidnapped civilians, as Americas Watch documented in 1984 and 1985, and the International Court of Justice ruled on June 27, 1986 that the United States had violated international law by arming and financing them.

As with Reagan’s statement on the Iran-Contra scandal, the *Times* speaks of “mistakes” in an effort to deflect attention from the fact that it justified and encouraged both the criminal wars of aggression and sweeping attacks on the fundamental constitutional rights of the American people. Its editorial pages justified these actions, and its news section published lies used to sell these “mistakes” to the public.

The *Times* played the leading role in justifying and promoting the criminal 2003 invasion of Iraq. On September 8, 2002, the

paper’s lead story was written by reporters Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller, under the headline “U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts.” They reported that Iraq “has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes” that American officials believed were centrifuge components. It added: “The first sign of a ‘smoking gun,’ they argue, may be a mushroom cloud.”

The same morning Vice President Dick Cheney told NBC’s *Meet the Press*, “There’s a story in the *New York Times* this morning,” and cited it as proof that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was seeking tubes for a centrifuge. The administration supplied the claim to the *Times*, then pointed to the *Times* as confirmation.

On May 26, 2004, in an editors’ note titled “The Times and Iraq,” the paper conceded coverage “that was not as rigorous as it should have been,” stories that depended on “Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles bent on ‘regime change,’” and editors “perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper.”

The editorial board openly advocated the invasion of Iraq, a criminal war of aggression, giving credence to “evidence” it knew to be based on lies. On February 6, 2003, it called Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation to the United Nations Security Council “the most powerful case to date that Saddam Hussein stands in defiance of Security Council resolutions” and “a sober, factual case against Mr. Hussein’s regime.” The United States invaded six weeks later.

The “war on terror” was accompanied by a frontal assault on democratic rights, of which the systematic illegal torture of prisoners was among the most egregious.

The administration of President George W. Bush built a network of secret CIA prisons abroad and tortured the men it held there, and in August 2002 it had the Justice Department write memos declaring the torture legal. The Senate Intelligence Committee reported on December 9, 2014 that the CIA held at least 119 men in these prisons, waterboarded prisoners, kept them awake for up to 180 hours in stress positions and chained one, partially nude, to a concrete floor until he died of suspected hypothermia.

Today, the *Times* editorial board admits that the United States “tortured prisoners.” But from 2004 until 2014, the paper consciously, deliberately and as a stated matter of editorial

policy refused to use the word “torture” to describe the criminal human rights abuses of the Bush administration, and its Sunday magazine openly justified the administration’s policies.

On April 28, 2004, CBS broadcast photographs taken by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. They showed Iraqi prisoners hooded, stacked naked in a pyramid, held on a leash and made to stand on a box with wires attached to the body, with American soldiers posing beside them.

Four days later, on May 2, 2004, the *New York Times Magazine* openly advocated the methods it would not call torture, in an essay, “Lesser Evils,” by Michael Ignatieff, Harvard professor and later leader of the Liberal Party of Canada: “To defeat evil, we may have to traffic in evils: indefinite detention of suspects, coercive interrogations, targeted assassinations, even pre-emptive war. These are evils because each strays from national and international law and because they kill people or deprive them of freedom without due process.”

For a decade the *Times* described waterboarding and the other methods in its news pages as “harsh” or “brutal interrogation methods.” It adopted the word “torture” only on August 7, 2014, after the Justice Department under Bush and Obama had ruled out prosecuting anyone. Executive Editor Dean Baquet explained that day that the *Times* had “avoided a label” of “torture” because “the Justice Department insisted that the techniques did not rise to the legal definition of ‘torture.’”

On surveillance, the editorial says only that the government “used broad new powers to track and monitor Americans and foreigners alike” and that the expansion “clearly went too far.”

The *New York Times* consistently worked to stop the exposure of mass warrantless surveillance and opposed its publication. It held its own reporters’ story on the National Security Agency’s warrantless wiretapping of Americans from before the November 2004 election until December 16, 2005. On May 22, 2014, in its Sunday Book Review, the *Times* condemned the publication of the exposure of US government criminality by Edward Snowden and the journalist Glenn Greenwald. In Michael Kinsley’s review of Greenwald’s account of the National Security Agency files leaked by Snowden in 2013, it declared that the decision to publish government secrets “must ultimately be made by the government. ... Someone gets to decide, and that someone cannot be Glenn Greenwald.”

The *Times*’s central complaint is that the wars launched under the label of the “war on terror” did not succeed in the US goal of dominating the Middle East. “For much of the period after the disaster of the Vietnam War, America adhered to its lessons,” the *Times* editorial board writes. “Go to war only with defined and achievable goals. Prevent ‘mission creep.’ Most of all, win.”

In this the *Times* echoes the Democratic Party’s criticism of the Trump administration’s war on Iran. Democratic Senator

Gary Peters of Michigan put the same demand to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing on July 21: “You don’t have a strategy. You don’t have a long-term plan to actually win this war.” Peters demanded that Hegseth “win this war.” These “mistakes” were, according to Peters, “an utter and complete failure to win this war to this point.”

The wars, the *Times* editorial board writes, “drained resources that could have been used to strengthen the country against emerging rivals,” that is, nuclear-armed China and Russia, which it does not name. Here the purpose of the exercise becomes clear. The “lessons” the *Times* draws from the “war on terror” are not lessons against war. They are lessons for even greater crimes.

This is why the editorial asks “America” to “face the mistakes that it made.” The American people did not decide to invade Iraq, to build the CIA’s secret prisons or to wiretap themselves. Those decisions were made by a ruling class, its two parties and its press, including the *Times*. Not one of the officials who ordered the torture, the editors who printed the lies or the politicians who voted for the wars has been held to account. The same people, and in many cases the same institutions, have supported the genocide in Gaza, agitated for decades for war against Iran, are demanding the escalation of the war against Russia, and preparing the war against China.

There is no reckoning with the “war on terror” that does not begin by naming those responsible for it, and no struggle against the coming wars that does not break with the imperialist Democratic and Republican parties and the entire corporate-financial military-intelligence establishment that the *New York Times* speaks for. That reckoning can be carried out only by the working class, mobilized independently and on the basis of its own interests, in the United States and internationally.



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