

Media: Just Find and Tell the Truth

An intellectual climate that equates questioning and criticism with treason has disastrous consequences

BY ROSS "ROCKY" ANDERSON

On January 28, 2003, President Bush pressed for war against Iraq, representing in his State of the Union address that Iraq was actively pursuing a nuclear arsenal. "The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa," said President Bush.

I was in Washington, D.C. on March 8. That morning, while having breakfast with friends who are former foreign service officers, I read in an article on the front page of the *Washington Post* that Dr. Mohamed El-Baradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, had declared the previous day that the documents which formed the basis for President Bush's claim were crude forgeries.

That article was not the top story on the front page. I wondered aloud why the media were not treating it as a huge scandal — one that would call into question the Bush Administration's rationale for heading toward war with Iraq. The understated treatment amazed me. "This should be the front-page headline story in every newspaper in the country," I said to my friends.

Upon returning to Salt Lake City, I asked several people, "Did you see anything in the local newspapers about the forgeries that served as the basis for President Bush's claim that Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa?" No one had seen or heard anything about it. (A *Salt Lake Tribune* editorial on February 2 began with the declaration that "[t]he United States has made a compelling case that Iraq has failed to rid itself of weapons of mass destruction." For several months not one word appeared, in either the *Salt Lake Tribune* or *Deseret News*, about the discovery that President Bush's representation regarding Iraq's so-called attempt to buy uranium from Africa was based on forged documents.) Most of our nation's press were asleep at the wheel while the U.S. veered toward a "preemptive" war against Iraq on the

basis of claims that its government was building up stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear armaments.

Now, astoundingly, the press reports the matter as if the revelation of the forgeries just occurred. In the July 21, 2003 issue of *Newsweek*, the article titled "A Spy Takes the Bullet" refers to "the administration's mishandling of intelligence during the run-up to the Iraq war" without disclosing that almost all the news media, including *Newsweek*, failed to alert the people of this nation about the false basis for President Bush's claim until four and a half months after Dr. El-Baradei made the disclosure — that is, until after the unprecedented "preemptive" war against Iraq had commenced and after President Bush declared on May 1 that major hostilities were over.

That wasn't the only nuclear lie that went unexposed by the complicit news media. Consider the following account by John R. MacArthur, publisher of *Harper's Magazine*, in the May/June 2003 issue of *Columbia Journalism Review*:

[T]he success of "Bush's PR War"... was largely dependent on a compliant press that uncritically repeated almost every fraudulent administration claim about the threat posed to America by Saddam Hussein.

[T]here was a disinformation campaign aimed at the people and Congress. Just a few columnists seriously challenged the White House advertising assault. Looking back over the debris of half-truths and lies, I can't help but ask... where was the American press on September 7, 2002, a day when we were sorely in need of reporters?

It was then that the White House propaganda drive began in earnest, with the appearance before television cameras of George Bush and Tony Blair at Camp David. Between them, the two politicians cited a "new" report from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency that allegedly stated that Iraq was "six months away" from building a nuclear weapon. "I don't know what more evidence we need," declared

the President.

For public relations purposes, it hardly mattered that no such IAEA report existed, because almost no one in the media bothered to check out the story...

Millions of people saw Bush tieless, casually inarticulate, but determined-looking and self-confident, making a completely uncorroborated (and, at that point, uncontradicted) case for preemptive war... [W]e might ask ourselves why no more evidence was needed than the President's say-so — and why no reporters asked for any.

Then there were the false claims, dutifully and uncritically parroted by the press, that Iraq had purchased aluminum tubes as components of centrifuges used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. As it turned out, those tubes were not suitable for the purpose alleged.

We heard and read repeatedly, in the government-bulletin-board press, the false claims that our intelligence had determined that Iraq was building up its stockpile of chemical and biological weapons. No such weapons have been located yet. Apparently our intelligence-gathering is much better from afar than on site.

Speaking of "intelligence": Polls of the American public have reflected an astounding ignorance about the most basic matters relative to our war against Iraq. In a Knight-Ridder poll, only 17% knew that none of the 9/11 hijackers were from Iraq. Fifty percent of respondents said "one," "some" or "most" of the 9/11 hijackers were from Iraq, and 33% said they "don't know." (Most of the September 11 terrorists were Saudis. No Iraqis were involved.)

According to a *Philadelphia Inquirer* poll, a third of the American public believes U.S. forces have found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (they have not), and 22% said Iraq actually used chemical or biological weapons during the course of the war (they did not).

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Finally, according to the Knight Ridder poll, about 68% of Americans believe that Iraq and al-Qaida have strong and continuing ties, despite an absence of evidence to support the claim. Were the news media competent; were the news media responsible; were the news media intent on finding and reporting the truth, the polls would not reflect such a dismal ignorance among the American public.

In an article titled "She Was Fighting to the Death," the *Washington Post* (April 3, 2003) described how Pfc. Jessica Lynch "fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army's 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company....

Lynch, a 19-year-old supply clerk, continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds....

"She was fighting to the death," the official said. "She did not want to be taken alive."

Lynch was also stabbed when Iraqi forces closed in on her position, the official said, noting that initial intelligence reports indicated that she had been stabbed to death.

"Lynch's rescue... was a classic Special Operations raid, with U.S. commandos in Black Hawk helicopters engaging Iraqi forces on their way in and out of the medical compound," defense officials said.

Acting on information from CIA operatives, they said, a Special Operations force of Navy SEALs, Army Rangers and Air Force combat controllers touched down in blacked-out conditions. An AC-130 gunship, able to fire 1,800 rounds a minute from its 25mm cannon, circled overhead, as did a reconnaissance aircraft providing video imagery of the operation as it unfolded.

Following dozens of similar unquestioning news reports based on the accounts of "officials," the truth has finally emerged:

Pfc. Jessica Lynch was not shot. She was not stabbed. She did not engage in an intense battle with Iraqis. She didn't even get off a shot from her jammed weapon. The Iraqis who had been guarding the hospital where Lynch was located had left by the time the U.S. forces came storming in.

The *Washington Post's* ombudsman, Michael Getler, made the compelling point by asking, "What were the motivations (and even the identities) of the leakers and sustainers of this myth, and why didn't reporters dig deeper into it

more quickly?" Getler then answered his own question: "This was the single most memorable story of the war, and it had a unique propaganda value. It was false, but it didn't get knocked down until it didn't matter quite so much."

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when government officials provide false information to the news media, they should be held accountable. Democracy demands no less.

A prevailing fiction is that our news media are independent, truth-seeking and truth-telling. In fact, most of our nation's media, for many years, have betrayed all of us who look to it to fulfill the promise of the First Amendment. We value a free press so we can learn the truth, but our national news media are pathetically shallow, apparently intellectually uncurious, and cowardly in the face of a dangerous jingoism that equates questioning and criticism with treason. As a result, we do not get the truth — in fact, we are lied to — with disastrous consequences.

We have seen it before. The press during the Reagan years was particularly obsequious. *On Bended Knee*, by Mark Hertsgaard, is required reading for anyone interested in how President Reagan got away, unscathed, with the illegal Iran-Contra dealings, the tragic

policy toward Central America, the invasion of Grenada, and the most excessive national deficit spending (to be exceeded only by President George W. Bush). It chronicles how the press was manipulated by an administration whose "objective was not simply to tame the press but to transform it into an unwitting mouthpiece of the government." By allowing itself to be manipulated and by self-censoring, the press abdicated its profound responsibility to the American public.

Hertsgaard offers the following quote from George Orwell:

One of the most extraordinary things about England is that there is almost no official censorship, and yet nothing that is actually offensive to the governing class gets into print, at least in any place where large numbers of people are likely to read it.... The position is summed up in the lines by (I think) Hilaire Belloc:

*You cannot hope to bribe or twist
Thank God! The British journalist:
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there is no reason to.*

That is a perfect description of the state of journalism in the United States today. As a result, we are denied the truth when it matters the most. Government officials with free rein to lie to us as they lead us into war, economic decline and the destruction of the trust of long-time allies undermine democracy. Perhaps worst of all, the recent abject failures by our news media to ferret out and report the truth — and their shameful willingness to serve as the bulletin boards for dishonest accounts by all sorts of government "officials" — undermine our trust at so many levels that we begin to distrust everything and everyone.

Knowing that elected and other government officials often lie, we must demand of our "free press" that the lies not be slavishly repeated by our news media, but thoroughly investigated and exposed in a timely manner, when the exposure will make a difference. A responsible press — one that finds and reports the truth — is crucial to democracy and to governmental accountability. A free press with integrity is essential if we are to avoid being subjects of our own authoritarian regime. ♦

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