

Mainstream Journalists: Immune from Accountability if they Run with the Pack - Even if a Catastrophic War is the Result

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In my four decades in national journalism – I started at the Associated Press in 1974 – I have grown increasingly concerned about how Americans respond to information, or put differently, how propagandists package their messaging to elicit the desired response. In an age of cynicism, the trick is to get the “big ha-ha!” – convincing you to laugh at the target whether deserved or not.

The way the process works is to first generate hatred or contempt toward a person or group and then produce “themes” that make the target a subject of ridicule and derision, demonized to such an extent that pretty much anything goes. Some of this behavior might seem relatively harmless but it can lead to serious unfairness, injustice, even war.

In 2000, I took heat from some colleagues for objecting to the “big ha-ha!” being directed at Vice President Al Gore. It had reached the point where the mainstream media even made up fictional quotes to put in Gore’s mouth – like “I invented the Internet” – so he could be mocked in favor of the much cooler George W. Bush, who rewarded favored journalists with pet nicknames.

This media hazing of wonky Al Gore carried over to the election in which Gore not only won the national popular vote but if all legal ballots in Florida had been counted, he would have carried that swing state and thus won the White House. But the mainstream U.S. media acted as if the idea of counting the votes and thus denying Bush the presidency was somehow dirty pool.



Journalist Robert Parry

Very quickly, the conventional wisdom solidified behind the idea that Gore was a “sore loser” who should just get out of the way. That prevailing attitude created political space for five Republican justices on the U.S. Supreme Court to halt the counting of votes in Florida, giving the state and the White House to George W. Bush. The conventional wisdom quickly morphed into the conviction that the media had to protect Bush’s “legitimacy.”

The consequences of that shoddy and biased journalism are hard to quantify. History might have gone off in a much less bloody direction if the U.S. media big shots had stuck up for the basic idea that the American voters should decide who becomes president. But it was so much easier for everyone to go with the flow. Al Gore was such a stiff. Ha-ha! [For details, see [Neck Deep](#).]

Reagan’s World

By 2000, I had already seen this pattern take shape and take control of American journalism. President Ronald Reagan and his skilled team of propagandists were masters at shaping the narrative and, via the media, convincing Americans that impoverished peasants in Central America were a grave threat to the United States and thus needed to be repressed.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega became “the dictator in designer glasses” and Sandinista-ruled Nicaragua was “a totalitarian dungeon.” Conversely, U.S. allies – no matter how corrupt and cruel – were placed on a pedestal. The cocaine-tainted Nicaraguan Contras were the “moral equal of the Founding Fathers.” The blood-soaked dictator of Guatemala Efraín Ríos Montt was a good Christian getting “a bum rap.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Victory of Perception Management.”](#)]

As the years went by, each international crisis became a replay. Iraq’s dictator Saddam Hussein was “worse than Hitler.” His troops pulled new-born infants out of incubators and smashed them to the floor. Today, it’s Russian President Vladimir Putin riding shirtless. What a macho jerk! Ha-ha!

So, when “white papers” or other government reports detail the offenses of these reviled leaders, who inside the mainstream U.S. media would risk his or her career by checking out the facts and challenging the accusations?

Indeed, you could build your career by going along, maybe becoming the “star reporter” who gets the latest approved “leak” from the U.S. intelligence community “confirming” how terrible the designated villain is. Or you could portray yourself as a “citizen journalist” and use Internet research to vindicate exactly what the U.S. government was claiming. Maybe a mainstream job or a U.S. AID grant awaits.

But I opted out of that game. For many years, I battled inside mainstream news organizations – the AP, Newsweek and PBS Frontline – trying to get reluctant, hostile or frightened editors to challenge the U.S. government’s propaganda as well as the media’s conventional wisdom. Eventually, I turned to the Internet and founded a Web site, which became Consortiumnews.com.

My job as I saw it was to do what I thought journalism was always supposed to do, i.e., look skeptically at whatever any government or powerful institution claimed to be true. I felt this was particularly important during international crises that carried the potential of war or – in the current case of Ukraine – the possibility of exterminating all life on the planet.

That doesn’t mean that governments and powerful institutions always lie. But it should mean that journalists demand hard facts and evidence before accepting what they’re told. Sadly, that attitude has become rare as the years have gone by.

It’s now almost expected that the New York Times and Washington Post will march in lockstep with the U.S. government on foreign policy, except perhaps when they bait a leader who shows some geopolitical restraint and doesn’t swagger aggressively into an international conflict. It also goes without saying that mainstream journalists are virtually immune from accountability if they run with the pack and later turn out to be wrong – even if a catastrophic war is the result.

Yet, despite the depths that journalism has reached in the United States and across the Western world, I still believe in its principles. Indeed, the only ism that I do believe in is journalism, which you might define as the assembling of facts within a framework of common sense and presented in a way that the average person can understand.

But I especially don’t like the piling-on “ha-ha” tendencies of today’s media. Whenever someone gets demonized and that demonization influences how information is handled, that’s where the worst violations of journalistic principles usually occur.

Recently, I’ve applied that skepticism in evaluating [claims about Russian guilt](#) in the 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 from British blogger Eliot Higgins and Australia’s “60 Minutes” or in assessing [the extravagant accusations about the Ukraine crisis](#) from U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power.

But the same journalistic principles apply in more mundane matters like the NFL’s harsh punishment of New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady in the overblown “Deflategate” case. Many Americans hate Brady and the Patriots, creating an atmosphere in which accusations are readily accepted even if [the evidence is weak or manipulated](#).

While I would argue that my journalism is consistent in this way, I know it tends to offend

people who have reached contrary conclusions and don't want to rethink them – or others who have a stake in the conventional wisdom. Then, I usually get accused of being someone's apologist – a "Sandinista apologist"; an "Al Gore apologist"; a "Saddam apologist"; a "Putin apologist"; or a "Brady apologist."

But it's really that I just don't like the "big ha-ha!"

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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