

The US Media and the Debacle in Iraq

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A column written by Chelsea (Bradley) Manning from his cell in the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas has done more to illuminate the real sources of the present debacle for US imperialism in Iraq than all of the lying and self-serving pieces produced by the well-paid pundits of the New York Times, the Washington Post and the other major news outlets combined.

The column by the imprisoned US soldier, published in Sunday's *New York Times*, is directed at exposing the role of government secrecy and control of the media in foisting onto the American public a war of aggression launched on the basis lies.

Manning insists that the sudden collapse of the US-trained and funded Iraqi army and the descent of the country toward a full-blown sectarian civil war only demonstrate that the concerns that motivated him to pass some 700,000 secret documents on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as well as US foreign policy skullduggery around the globe to WikiLeaks "have not been resolved."

Breaking the wall of secrecy and misinformation maintained by the government and the media provoked the wrath of the US ruling establishment. The soldier and former intelligence analyst is now serving a 35-year prison term. In April, an army general rejected a motion for clemency.

Manning examines the US reaction to the 2010 election of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had been installed by the US occupation four years earlier. The American press, the imprisoned soldier recalls, "was flooded with stories declaring the elections a success," aimed at creating the image of the US war having "succeeded in creating a stable and democratic Iraq."

During this same period, he writes, he and other military analysts in Baghdad were receiving continuous reports of "a brutal crackdown of political dissidents by Iraq's Ministry of the Interior and federal police," acting on behalf of Maliki. Opponents of the US-backed prime minister "were often tortured, or even killed," he notes.

Manning exposes the direct complicity of the US military in these crimes, reporting that he informed the US officer in command of eastern Baghdad that 15 individuals arrested for publishing a critique of Maliki's government "had absolutely no ties to terrorism." The commander responded that "he didn't need this information; instead, I should assist the federal police in locating more 'anti-Iraqi' print shops."

"I was shocked by our military's complicity in the corruption of that election. Yet these deeply troubling details flew under the American media's radar," he writes.

This account gives the lie to the US media chorus that the present debacle in Iraq is “all Maliki’s fault.”

Manning attributes the sharp divergence between the developments in Iraq and the media’s portrayal of them in part to the Pentagon’s censorship of coverage of the war through the system of “embedded” journalists. Reporters who had good relations with the military and provided favorable coverage got access, while those who exposed scandals, crimes and lies faced blacklisting, he writes.

There is no doubt that this system of military censorship played a major role in concealing from the American people the grisly and criminal character of a war that claimed the lives of upward of a million Iraqis, while killing nearly 4,500 US troops and leaving tens of thousands more wounded.

However, the process of “embedding” began well before Bush ordered “shock and awe” to be unleashed on Baghdad, and included not just war correspondents, but the top columnists, editors and publishers of the major newspapers and other media outlets.

People like *Times* publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr. and Bill Keller, who in 2003 rose from senior writer and leading war advocate to *Times* executive editor, lent themselves and their newspapers unreservedly to a massive campaign to pressure the American public to support a war of aggression against Iraq. They decided to parrot the government’s lies about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” and ties between Baghdad and Al Qaeda—both non-existent—and to eschew any critical investigation of the Bush administration’s war propaganda. On the contrary, through the sinister efforts of the *Times* and its correspondent Judith Miller, they embellished upon this propaganda, piling on their own lies.

Now, as the full extent of the debacle created by the wanton destruction of Iraqi society is revealed, those who served as media propagandists for the war are circling the wagons, looking to protect their own backsides. Columnists like the *Times*’ Thomas Friedman—who more than a decade ago wrote that he had “no problem with a war for oil”—and Nicholas Kristof have published pieces insisting that Maliki is solely to blame for Iraq’s disintegration, and the US had nothing to do with it.

They were followed Monday by a particularly foul column by *Times* columnist Roger Cohen entitled “Take Mosul back,” calling for US intervention to “drive back the fanatics of the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).”

Cohen uses the column to ridicule those playing “the blame game,” a breathtakingly cynical denunciation of any attempt to assign responsibility for a war that killed over a million people and destroyed an entire society.

“The facts are plain enough,” he writes “The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 because of its weapons of mass destruction. However, Iraq did not have any weapons of mass destruction.” Plain enough indeed—the war was based upon a lie, which Cohen helped disseminate.

He goes on: “There was no Al Qaeda in Saddam’s Iraq. The United States birthed it through the invasion.” Thus, another lie was used to justify the war, whose catastrophic consequences include the strengthening of extreme Islamist and sectarian tendencies in Iraq and throughout the region.

In his piece, Cohen demands that the Obama administration unleash “targeted military force” against the “fanatics” of ISIS. But he enthusiastically supported Washington’s use of these same “fanatics” in wars for regime-change first in Libya and then Syria. He waves aside any questions about the logic of such policies: “A logical approach in the Middle East is seldom a feasible approach.” The only “logic” is the use of whatever instrument is at hand to assert US hegemony and plunder the region’s resources.

“The blame game misses the point,” Cohen repeats. Both Iraq and Syria were “ripe for dismemberment” before “America’s hapless intervention.”

Whom is he kidding? The US intervention was anything but “hapless,” employing all of the firepower at the Pentagon’s command in a campaign that saw some 1,700 bombing sorties—including 504 using cruise missiles—in the space of three days.

One might just as well describe 1939 Europe as “ripe for dismemberment” and Hitler’s blitzkrieg as “hapless,” or dismiss the Nuremberg tribunals as a futile exercise in “the blame game.”

The reality is that real apportioning of blame has yet to take place. That requires that those responsible for planning and executing the war of aggression against Iraq—from Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice and Powell to the top military commanders—be placed on trial as war criminals.

At Nuremberg, it bears recalling, standing in the dock—and ultimately on the gallows—with the surviving leaders of the Third Reich was Julius Streicher, the editor of the vile, anti-Semitic weekly *Der Stürmer* and later the daily *Fränkische Tageszeitung*. While the tribunal found that Streicher had no direct part in formulating war policy, he nonetheless played a vital role in poisoning the consciousness of the German people. Without Streicher’s propaganda efforts, the prosecution argued, the German generals “would have had no one to follow orders.”

In any genuine accounting for the crimes of the Iraq War, Cohen, Friedman, Keller and those like them, who enthusiastically served the Pentagon’s propaganda machine, would have to similarly be tried for their criminal promotion of aggressive war.

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