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The Media as Enablers of Government Lies

by James Bovard

Why do politicians so easily get away with telling lies? In large part, because the news media are more interested in bonding with politicians than in exposing them. Americans are encouraged to believe that the media will serve as a check and a balance on the government. Instead, the press too often volunteer as unpaid pimps, helping politicians deceive the public.

In 1936, *New York Times* White House correspondent Turner Catledge said that President Roosevelt's "first instinct was always to lie." But the Washington press corps covered up Roosevelt's dishonesty almost as thoroughly as they hid his use of a wheelchair in daily life.

President Bill Clinton benefited from a press corps that often treated his falsehoods as nonevents — or even petty triumphs. *Newsweek* White House correspondent Howard Fineman commented that Clinton's "great strength is his insincerity.... I've decided Bill Clinton is at his most genuine when he's the most phony.... We know he doesn't mean what he says."

Flora Lewis, a *New York Times* columnist, writing three weeks before 9/11, commented in a review of a book on U.S. government lies on the Vietnam War, "There will probably never be a return to the discretion, really collusion, with which the media used to treat presidents, and it is just as well." But within months of her comment, the media had proven itself as craven as ever. The *Washington Post's* Dana Milbank, who did some of the best exposés of George W. Bush's falsehoods in his first term, noted that it was not until July 2002 that "the White House press corps showed its teeth" in response to administration deceptions. Even the exposés of FBI and CIA intelligence failures in May 2002 did not end the "phase of alliance" between the White House and the press, as political scientist Martha Kumar observed.

Deference to the government is now the trademark of the American media — at least at times when the truth could have the greatest impact. The media were grossly negligent in failing to question or examine Bush's claims on the road to war. When journalists dug up the truth, editors sometimes ignored or buried their reports. *Washington Post* Pentagon correspondent Thomas Ricks complained that, in the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, "There was an attitude among editors: 'Look, we're going to war; why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff?'"

New York Times White House correspondent Elisabeth Bumiller explained the press's conduct at a Bush press conference just before he invaded Iraq: "I think we were very deferential because ... nobody wanted to get into an argument with the president at this very serious time."

After the war started, the falsehood of Bush's claims was often treated as a one-day story, buried in the back of the front section or on the editorial page. Afterward, most papers quickly returned to printing the president's proclamations as gospel. Eric Alterman, author of *When Presidents Lie*, observed,

Virtually every major news media outlet devoted more attention to the lies and dissimulations of one *New York Times* reporter, Jayson Blair, than to those of the president and vice president of the United States regarding Iraq. Given that these two deceptions took place virtually simultaneously, they demonstrate that while some forms of deliberate deception remain intolerable in public life, those of the U.S. commander in chief are not among them.

Docility

The media's docility to the Bush administration repeated the pattern established during the first Gulf War (and during much of the Vietnam War). Chris Hedges, who covered the 1990-91 Gulf War for the *New York Times*, later explained, "The notion that the press was used in the war is incorrect. The press wanted to be used. It saw itself as part of the war effort." Hedges noted that journalists were "eager to be of service to the State," which "made it easier to do what governments do in wartime, indeed what governments do much of the time, and that is lie."

Far from being irate about presidential lies, the media often enjoy sharing a laugh with the commander in chief over such technical inaccuracies. On March 24, 2004, President Bush performed a skit for those attending the Radio and Television Correspondents' annual dinner in which he showed slides of himself crawling around his office peaking behind curtains while he quipped to the crowd, "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere.... Nope, no weapons over there.... Maybe under here?"

Bush's comic bit got one of the biggest laughs of the night. The *Washington Post* Style section hailed the evening's performance with a headline — "George Bush, Entertainer in Chief." The media dignitaries made no fuss over the comments — until a mini-firestorm erupted a few days later, spurred by criticism by Democrats and soldiers who had fought in Iraq. Greg Mitchell, the editor of *Editor and Publisher*, labeled the press's reaction as "one of the most shameful episodes in the recent history of the American media, and presidency."

The character of the Washington press corps also shone bright in its nonresponse to the Downing Street Memo. On May 1, 2005, the *London Times* printed a memo from a British cabinet meeting on July 23, 2002, that reported the findings of the visit by Britain's intelligence chief to

Washington to confer with CIA chief George Tenet and other top Bush administration officials. The memo quoted the intelligence chief:

Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.

The fact that the top level of the British government was aware that the Bush administration was fixing — i.e., manipulating and contriving — intelligence and facts to justify going to war was a bombshell in the United Kingdom. The decision to “fix” facts was illustrated by the torrent of false accusations and statements that Bush and his top officials made against Iraq in the following months. Throughout 2002, Bush continued to say that he had hoped to avoid going to war with Saddam. In his State of the Union address in late January 2003 and in his subsequent speeches, he talked about the United States as a victim, repeatedly asserting that “if war is forced upon us, we will fight.” Bush had long since decided to attack, regardless of how many UN weapons inspectors Saddam permitted to roam Iraq.

Yet the memo was almost completely ignored by the American mainstream media for the first month after its publication in Britain. As *Salon* columnist Joe Conason commented, “To judge by their responses, the leading lights of the Washington press corps are more embarrassed than the White House is by the revelations in the Downing Street memo.”

Deceit has become ritualized in U.S. foreign policy. From 2002 onwards, the White House Iraq Group spewed out false information that the *New York Times* and other prominent media outlets routinely accepted without criticism or verification. After many of the assertions were later discovered to be false, the White House and much of the media treated the falsehoods as irrelevant to the legitimacy of the U.S. invasion. The lack of attention paid to political lies is itself symptomatic of the bias in favor of submitting to rulers regardless of how much people are defrauded.

Katrina

Hurricane Katrina provided an opportunity for the media to ritually renounce their own servility. As the nonresponse and pervasive debacle became undeniable and the death count soared to more than a thousand, many talking heads pointed out the government’s “failures” and proudly showed their indignation. A *New York Times* headline summed up the broadcast media’s change in tone: “Reporters Turn From Deference to Outrage.” One BBC commentator observed, “Amidst the horror, American broadcast journalism just might have grown its spine back, thanks to Katrina,” which he suggested could provide an antidote to the “timid and self-censoring journalistic culture that is no match for the masterfully aggressive spin-surgeons of the Bush

administration.” NBC *Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams explained, “By dint of the fact that our country was hit [in 2001] we’ve offered a preponderance of the benefit of the doubt [to the government] over the past couple [sic] of years. Perhaps ... this is the story that brings a healthy amount of cynicism back to a news media known for it.” But such periodic affirmations of independence are as credible as an alcoholic who, regaining consciousness after tumbling down the stairs, piously announces the end of his boozing days. There will be other bottles — and other stairs.

The pursuit of respectability in Washington usually entails acquiescing to government lies. Many if not most members of the Washington press corps are government dependents. Few Washington journalists have the will to expose government lies. That would require placing one in an explicitly adversarial position to the government. It is not that the typical journalist is intentionally covering up government lies, but that his radar is not set to detect such occurrences. Lies rarely register in Washington journalists’ minds because they are usually supplicants for government information, not dogged pursuers of the truth. Raising troublesome questions will not help you get any “silver platter” stories.

The vast majority of the media docilely repeated Bush’s claims through most of his presidency. Television networks very likely devoted a hundred times as much air time to peddling government falsehoods as they did to exposing them. The constant barrage of falsehood drowns out the occasional blips of truth. The government only needs the number of people who recognize its lies to be small enough that its latest power play will not be thwarted. The goal is not to prevent well-informed citizens from being nauseated or disgusted by the president’s lies. Instead, it is to neutralize the mass reaction to presidential falsehoods, even those that have catastrophic consequences.

If Americans wish to retain the remnants of their liberty, they cannot trust the media to warn them about government tyranny. In order to recognize government deceit, there is no substitute for more citizens to make more effort to find the truth for themselves.

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