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The *New York Times* whitewashes Bush's lies about Iraq

By Patrick Martin
15 January 2004

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An editorial published January 11 in the *New York Times*, the leading US daily newspaper, demonstrates the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of what passes for liberalism in contemporary America. It is a cover-up of the systematic lying employed by the Bush administration, the congressional Republicans and Democrats, and the American media to justify the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The *Times* whitewash is particularly reprehensible because it seeks to masquerade as a critique of the Bush administration's preparation and launching of the war. There are more than a few harsh adjectives to describe the White House's actions: "reckless rush to invade Iraq," "obsession with the Iraqi dictator," "falsity of intelligence estimates," "failure to find anything significant."

The central proposition advanced by the *Times* is that the Bush administration was a victim of misinformation and misjudgments, which led the US government to produce what the editorial's headline describes as "The Faulty Weapons Estimates." This is a grotesque lie: Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld & Co. were not merely mistaken on the question of weapons of mass destruction. They deliberately and consciously fabricated claims of an imminent Iraqi threat to the United States to terrorize the American people and override the widespread popular opposition to an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign nation.

It is hardly necessary to rehash in detail the massive evidence of US lies on Iraq. The major allegations of weapons of mass destruction made by Bush

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administration spokesmen during the seven-month campaign for war, from September 2002 to March 2003, have been completely disproved, in many cases even before the war began. The Bush White House was compelled to admit that one of the central charges made in Bush's State of Union Speech in January 2003, that Iraq was seeking to purchase uranium for nuclear weapons in Africa, was false and was known to be false by US officials when Bush's speechwriters put the words in his mouth.

Top UN officials like UNSCOM chief Hans Blix and Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, filed a series of reports with the Security Council which documented Iraq's general compliance with resolutions demanding the scrapping of its chemical weapons stocks and its rudimentary biological and nuclear weapons programs. They found no evidence that Iraq had resumed any of these programs since they were shut down under UN sanctions in the early 1990s.

Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, along with many other experts, made devastating exposures of the longstanding US policy—going back to the Clinton administration and the first Bush administration—of making false claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to justify the ongoing regime of economic sanctions which contributed to the deaths as many as 1.5 million Iraqis, half of them children.

The clearest refutation of the weapons of mass destruction claims has been the failure of US forces to find any of the vast stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons—hundreds of thousands of liters of toxins, hundreds of tons of chemical arms—that Iraq was supposed to possess. Ten months of intensive searching by 1,500 US military specialists has found nothing but a few documents of old and abandoned weapons programs.

Last week saw three more confirmations that the US government lied about weapons of mass destruction:

* The Bush administration pulled out the remaining 400 military specialists searching for the weapons and the head of the search team, David Kay, let it be known he was leaving his post without even filing a final report.

* The *Washington Post* published a lengthy analysis, based on interviews with leaders of the Iraqi Governing Council and the US military, concluding that Iraq had destroyed its remaining chemical weapons and biotoxins by 1995 (Iraq never possessed nuclear weapons and its nuclear research program was scrapped in 1991.)

* The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a leading think tank of the US foreign policy establishment, published a scathing report on the handling of intelligence information on Iraq, charging that from mid-2002 the Bush administration began to issue deliberately exaggerated and distorted accounts of Iraqi military capabilities in order to portray the blockaded, starving country as a threat to the United States.

The *Times* editorial takes note of these reports, but only as evidence that US intelligence agencies “were tragically unable to provide accurate information on Iraq.” The editorial then concludes by calling for a “nonpartisan investigation independent of political pressures from the administration and Congress ... to get a better sense of how judgments about Iraq were so disastrously mistaken. Nothing can be fixed until we know for sure how it happened.”

It's all a great unknown, the *Times* suggests. This is a statement, not only of intellectual dishonesty, but also of direct political complicity. What “happened” in Iraq was that the US government decided to wage a war of aggression to seize control of the second largest oil reserves in the world, install a puppet regime in Baghdad, and establish US military forces in a key strategic position in the center of the Middle East. The appropriate response is not a “nonpartisan investigation” into supposed mistakes, but a war crimes tribunal for Bush, Cheney and their accomplices, in the government and in corporate America, including the media.

There is no mystery at all about the origins of the war with Iraq. Many of those in leading positions in the Bush administration—including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, the Pentagon's number three official, and others—were part of a coterie of right-wing strategists who campaigned throughout the 1990s for a resumption of the war with Iraq, which they felt had been cut short prematurely in 1991 by Bush's father.

In 1998, with the Clinton administration reeling from the Monica Lewinsky affair, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, bipartisan legislation which made the overthrow of Saddam Hussein the official policy of the US government and proffered \$50 million in aid to US-backed front groups like the Iraqi National Council of Ahmed Chalabi. Clinton sought to appease his right-wing foes with a series of military strikes against Iraq, including four days of heavy bombing at the height of the impeachment crisis.

When Bush took office in January 2001, as his Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill has confirmed in a book published this week, regime change in Iraq was “Topic A” for the National Security Council, and administration officials

were drafting plans for replacing the Ba'athist government with US puppets and carving up the oilfields. There was no talk then of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction as an actual threat to the United States—WMD was merely one of many possible pretexts for military action.

Initially the White House and Pentagon believed that the best excuse for war with Iraq would be found in the occasional anti-aircraft fire by Iraqi forces against warplanes patrolling the no-fly zones in southern and northern Iraq. These zones were established unilaterally by the US and Britain, without any authorizing resolution from the Security Council, and were not recognized by Iraq. The Bush administration repeatedly suggested in the early months of 2001 that Iraqi potshots at US fighter jets—none of which was ever actually hit—amounted to acts of war.

Then came September 11, 2001, and the administration had a more plausible pretext for war. Without a shred of evidence, administration spokesmen resorted to hints, allusions, implications and suggestions that an Iraq-Al Qaeda connection existed—despite the longstanding political enmity between the secular Ba'athist regime in Baghdad, and the Islamic fundamentalists of Al Qaeda. (The Carnegie Endowment report heaps particular scorn on this allegation.)

The Bush administration had considerable success in this campaign to deceive the American people, with opinion polls showing that as many as half the population believed, not only that Saddam Hussein ordered the September 11 attacks, but that most of those who hijacked the airliners were Iraqis!

In this campaign of lies, the administration had the indispensable assistance of the American media. The *New York Times*, despite its handwringing reservations about the feasibility of a unilateral American conquest of Iraq, played a key role in the media campaign. It not only failed to challenge the flood of falsifications from the White House and Pentagon, it became a direct participant, particularly through the dispatches of Judith Miller, a *Times* reporter who was a major conduit for false charges about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and who went on to serve as an embedded correspondent with the military search teams looking for weapons stockpiles in postwar Iraq.

The US war with Iraq was the product, not of faulty intelligence, but of a colossal failure of American democracy. The Bush administration deliberately instigated a war of aggression. Congress passed a war resolution giving Bush blank-check authority to launch the war, with most leading Democrats supporting it. The media eagerly parroted the administration's lies

and portrayed Iraq as a deadly threat to the American people.

All of these pillars of the US political establishment—the administration, both parties in Congress, the corporate-controlled media—sought to suppress and intimidate the widespread popular opposition to the war, expressed in the demonstrations of February 2003 which brought millions onto the streets of the United States and countries throughout the world. That position continues to this day, in the consensus in the ruling elite that regardless of political differences before the war, the United States cannot withdraw from Iraq and must prevail militarily over the mounting Iraqi resistance to occupation.

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