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JOE CONASON

A press coverup

Leave it to the Beltway herd, with their special brand of arrogance, to insist that the Downing Street memo wasn't news.

By Joe Conason

June 17, 2005 | 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](#) -- which quite suddenly is becoming as "famous" as NBC's Tim Russert suggested weeks ago, when most of his colleagues and everyone at his network were still ignoring the document.

Mooing in plaintive chorus, the Beltway herd insists that the July 23, 2002, memo wasn't news -- which would be true if the absence of news were defined only by their refusal to report it.

They tell us the memo wasn't news because everybody understood that George W. Bush had decided to wage war many months before the United States and its allies invaded Iraq. The memo wasn't news because anyone who didn't comprehend that reality back then has come to realize the unhappy facts during the three ensuing years. The memo wasn't news because Americans already knew that the Bush administration was "fixing the intelligence and facts around the policy," rather than making policy that reflected the intelligence and the facts about Iraq.

Only a very special brand of arrogance would permit any employee of the New York Times, which brought us the mythmaking of [Judith Miller](#), to insist that new documentary evidence of "intelligence fixing" about Saddam's arsenal is no longer news. The same goes for the Washington Post, which featured phony administration claims about Iraq's weapons on Page 1 while burying the skeptical stories that proved correct.

If you listen to those mooing most loudly, such as the editorial page editors of the Post, the Downing Street memo still isn't news because it doesn't "prove" anything. (Only a Post [editorial](#) would refer to Sir Richard Dearlove, the chief of Britain's MI6 intelligence service who reported the fixing of intelligence to fit Bush's war plans, as merely "a British official.") Certainly it proves much about the candid views held by the most

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knowledgeable figures in the British government. Evidently the Post's editorialists would rather not learn what else the memo might prove if its clues were investigated.

How foolish and how sad that all these distinguished journalists prefer to transform this scandal into a debate about their own underachieving performance, rather than redeem mainstream journalism by advancing an important story that they should have pursued from the beginning. This is a moment when the mainstream press could again demonstrate to a skeptical public why we need journalists. Instead they are proving once more that their first priority is to cover their own behinds.

To my ear, their arguments lack conviction as well as logic. Although reporters tend to be timid or cynical, very few are stupid -- and almost none are truly stupid enough to believe that this memo wasn't "news" according to any professional definition of that word.

Deciding what constitutes news is a subjective exercise, of course, with all the uncertainty that implies. Yet there are several obvious guidelines to keep in mind while listening to the excuses proffered in the New York Times and the Washington Post by reporters who must know better.

A classified document recording deliberations by the highest officials of our most important ally over the decision to wage war is always news. A document that shows those officials believed the justification for war was "thin" and that the intelligence was being "fixed" is always news. A document that indicates the president was misleading the world about his determination to wage war only as a last resort is always news.

And when such a document is leaked, whatever editors, reporters and producers may think "everyone" already knows or believes about its contents emphatically *does not* affect whether that piece of paper is news. The journalists' job is to determine whether it is authentic and then to probe into its circumstances and meaning. There are many questions still to be answered about the Downing Street memo, but the nation's most prominent journalists still aren't asking them.

As striking as the bizarre redefinition of news now underway among the Washington press corps is its strange deficit of memory. Everyone did not know in the summer and fall of 2002 that Bush had reached a firm decision to wage war -- not even if "everyone" really refers only to the readers of the Times and the Post.

What were the Post and the Times telling us then about the president's intentions?

Consider Michael Kinsley, the Los Angeles Times editorial page editor and columnist, who recently derided the memo's importance. According to him, "you don't need a secret memo" to know that "the administration's decision to topple Saddam Hussein by force" had been reached by then. Anybody could tell that war was "inevitable," he wrote. "Just look at what was in the newspapers on July 23, 2002, and the day before," he wrote, citing an opinion column by Robert Scheer and a Times story about Pentagon war planning.

But let's also look at what Kinsley himself wrote on July 12, 2002, after those war plans were leaked. On the Post's Op-Ed page, he suggested that despite all the logistical planning and bellicose rhetoric, "Bush may be bluffing ... Or he may be lying, and the leak may be part of an official strategy of threatening all-out war in the hope of avoiding it, by encouraging a coup or persuading Hussein to take early retirement or in some other way getting him gone without a massive invasion."

So Kinsley himself wasn't quite certain whether Bush had decided on war, yet now he says we all knew.

On that same Op-Ed page two months later, fervent hawk James Hoagland, whose views on the war closely reflect those of the paper's editorial board, wrote a column about the president's U.N. speech. Hoagland described Bush as "diligent prosecuting attorney, sorrowful statesman and reluctant potential warrior.

"Bush wisely did not base his appeals for collective action against Iraq on a doctrine of preemption ... Instead he explained how the need for such drastic steps can be avoided by concerted international action." War, that is, could still be avoided, or so Hoagland believed as of Sept. 15, 2002.

A few days earlier, an editorial in the Times had likewise lauded the president's speech: "While Mr. Bush reserved the right to act independently to restrain Iraq, he expressed a preference for working in concert with other nations and seemed willing to employ measures short of war before turning to the use of force. These are welcome and important statements." So despite what Times reporters and analysts claim today, their newspaper clearly did not consider war inevitable several weeks after July 23, 2002.

And on Oct. 8, 2002, the Times noted approvingly that in requesting a congressional war resolution, Bush had said: "Approving this resolution does not mean that military action is imminent or unavoidable." The next day, the paper of record reported that around the world, politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens had derived hope from those words.

Those hopes were misplaced, as we now can be certain. Instead of pretending that we all knew what we know now, the Washington press corps should stop spinning excuses, stop redefining what constitutes news and start doing its job.

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About the writer

[Joe Conason](#) writes a weekly column for Salon and the [New York Observer](#). His book "Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth" is available [here](#).

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