

Lies of Our *Times*

From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August.

—ANDREW H. CARD, WHITE HOUSE CHIEF OF STAFF, SPEAKING ABOUT THE IRAQ WAR P.R. CAMPAIGN, SEPTEMBER 6, 2002¹

IN THE MIDST OF the buildup to war, a major scandal was unfolding at *The New York Times*—the paper that sets the news agenda for other media. The *Times* admitted that for several years a 27-year-old reporter named Jayson Blair had been conning his editors and falsifying stories. He had pretended to be places he hadn't been, fabricated quotes, and just plain lied in order to tell a sensational tale. For this, Blair was fired. But the *Times* went further: It ran a 7,000-word, five-page exposé on the young reporter, laying bare his personal and professional escapades.

The *Times* said it had reached a low point in its 152-year history. I agreed. But not because of the Jayson Blair affair. It was the *Times* coverage of the Bush-Blair affair.

When George W. Bush and Tony Blair made their fraudulent

case to attack Iraq, the *Times*, along with most corporate media outlets in the United States, became cheerleaders for the war. And while Jayson Blair was being crucified for his journalistic sins, veteran *Times* national security correspondent and best-selling author Judith Miller was filling the *Times*' front pages with unchallenged government propaganda. Unlike Blair's deceptions, Miller's lies provided the pretext for war. Her lies cost lives.

If only *The New York Times* had done the same kind of investigation of Miller's reports as it had with Jayson Blair.

THE WHITE HOUSE PROPAGANDA blitz was launched on September 7, 2002, at a Camp David press conference. British Prime Minister Tony Blair stood side by side with his co-conspirator, President George W. Bush. Together, they declared that evidence from a report published by the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) showed that Iraq was "six months away" from building nuclear weapons.

"I don't know what more evidence we need," crowed Bush.

Actually, *any* evidence would help—there was no such IAEA report. But at the time, few mainstream American journalists questioned the leaders' outright lies. Instead, the following day, "evidence" popped up in the Sunday *New York Times* under the twin byline of Michael Gordon and Judith Miller. "More than a decade after Saddam Hussein agreed to give up weapons of mass destruction," they stated with authority, "Iraq has stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons and has embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb, Bush administration officials said today."²

In a revealing example of how the story amplified administration spin, the authors included the phrase soon to be repeated by President Bush and all his top officials: "The first sign of a

‘smoking gun,’ [administration officials] argue, may be a mushroom cloud.”

Harper’s publisher John R. MacArthur, author of *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*, knew what to make of this front-page bombshell. “In a disgraceful piece of stenography,” he wrote, Gordon and Miller “inflated an administration leak into something resembling imminent Armageddon.”

The Bush administration knew just what to do with the story they had fed to Gordon and Miller. The day the *Times* story ran, Vice President Dick Cheney made the rounds on the Sunday talk shows to advance the administration’s bogus claims. On NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Cheney declared that Iraq had purchased aluminum tubes to make enriched uranium. It didn’t matter that the IAEA refuted the charge both before and after it was made. But Cheney didn’t want viewers just to take his word for it. “There’s a story in *The New York Times* this morning,” he said smugly. “And I want to attribute the *Times*.”³

This was the classic disinformation two-step: the White House leaks a lie to the *Times*, the newspaper publishes it as a startling exposé, and then the White House conveniently masquerades behind the credibility of the *Times*.

“What mattered,” wrote MacArthur, “was the unencumbered rollout of a commercial for war.”⁴

Judith Miller was just getting warmed up. Reporting for America’s most influential newspaper, Miller continued to trumpet administration leaks and other bogus sources as the basis for eye-popping stories that backed the administration’s false premises for war. “If reporters who live by their sources were obliged to die by their sources,” Jack Shafer wrote later in *Slate*, “Miller would be stinking up her family tomb right now.”

After the war, Shafer pointed out, “None of the sensational allegations about chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons given to

Miller have panned out, despite the furious crisscrossing of Iraq by U.S. weapons hunters.”⁵

Did *The New York Times* publish corrections? Clarifications? Did heads roll? Not a chance: Judith Miller’s “scoops” continued to be proudly run on the front pages.

Here are just some of the corrections the *Times* should have run after the year-long campaign of front-page false claims by one of its premier reporters, Judith Miller.

From *The New York Times* Department of Corrections

Scoop: “U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts,” by Judith Miller and Michael R. Gordon, September 8, 2002. The authors quote Ahmed al-Shemri (a pseudonym), who contends that he worked in Iraq’s chemical weapons program before defecting in 2000. “‘All of Iraq is one large storage facility,’ said Mr. Shemri, who claimed to have worked for many years at the Muthanna State Enterprise, once Iraq’s chemical weapons plant.” The authors quote Shemri as stating that Iraq is stockpiling “12,500 gallons of anthrax, 2,500 gallons of gas gangrene, 1,250 gallons of aflatoxin, and 2,000 gallons of botulinum throughout the country.”

Oops: As UN weapons inspectors had earlier stated—and U.S. weapons inspectors confirmed in September 2003—none of these claims were true. The unnamed source is one of many Iraqi defectors who made sensational false claims that were championed by Miller and the *Times*.

Scoop: “White House Lists Iraq Steps to Build Banned Weapons,” by Judith Miller and Michael Gordon, September 13, 2002. The article quotes the White House contention that Iraq

was trying to purchase aluminum pipes to assist its nuclear weapons program.

Oops: Rather than run a major story on how the United States had falsely cited the UN to back its claim that Iraq was expanding its nuclear weapons program, Miller and Gordon repeated and embellished the lie.

Contrast this with the lead paragraph of a story that ran in the British daily *The Guardian* on September 9: “The International Atomic Energy Agency has no evidence that Iraq is developing nuclear weapons at a former site previously destroyed by UN inspectors, despite claims made over the weekend by Tony Blair, western diplomatic sources told *The Guardian* yesterday.” The story goes on to say that the IAEA “issued a statement insisting it had ‘no new information’ on Iraq’s nuclear program since December 1998 when its inspectors left Iraq.”⁶

Miller’s trumped-up story contributed to the climate of the time and the *Times*. A month later, numerous congressional representatives cited the nuclear threat as a reason for voting to authorize war.

Scoop: “U.S. Faulted Over Its Efforts to Unite Iraqi Dissidents,” by Judith Miller, October 2, 2002. Quoting Ahmed Chalabi and Defense Department adviser Richard Perle, this story stated: “The INC [Iraqi National Congress] has been without question the single most important source of intelligence about Saddam Hussein.”

Miller airs the INC’s chief complaint: “Iraqi dissidents and administration officials complain that [the State Department and CIA] have also tried to cast doubt on information provided by defectors Mr. Chalabi’s organization has brought out of Iraq.”

Oops: Miller championed the cause of Chalabi, the Iraqi exile leader who had been lobbying Washington for over a decade to support the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime. As *The Washington Post* revealed, Miller wrote to *Times* veteran foreign corre-

spondent John Burns, who was working in Baghdad at the time, that Chalabi “has provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD [weapons of mass destruction] to our paper.”⁷

Times readers might be interested to learn the details of how Ahmed Chalabi was bought and paid for by the CIA. Chalabi heads the INC, an organization of Iraqi exiles created by the CIA in 1992 with the help of the Rendon Group, a powerful public relations firm that has worked extensively for the two Bush administrations. Between 1992 and 1996, the CIA covertly funneled \$12 million to Chalabi’s INC.⁸ In 1998, the Clinton administration gave Chalabi control of another \$98 million of U.S. taxpayer money. Chalabi’s credibility has always been questionable: He was convicted in absentia in Jordan of stealing some \$500 million from a bank he established, leaving shareholders high and dry. He has been accused by Iraqi exiles of pocketing at least \$4 million of CIA funds.⁹

In the lead-up to war, the CIA dismissed Chalabi as unreliable. But he was the darling of Pentagon hawks, putting an Iraqi face on their warmongering. So the Pentagon established a new entity, the Office of Special Plans, to champion the views of discredited INC defectors who helped make its case for war.

As Howard Kurtz later asked in *The Washington Post*: “Could Chalabi have been using the *Times* to build a drumbeat that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction?”¹⁰

Scoop: “C.I.A. Hunts Iraq Tie to Soviet Smallpox,” by Judith Miller, December 3, 2002. The story claims that “Iraq obtained a particularly virulent strain of smallpox from a Russian scientist.” The story adds later: “The information came to the American government from an informant whose identity has not been disclosed.”

Smallpox was cited by President Bush as one of the “weapons of mass destruction” possessed by Iraq that justified a dangerous national inoculation program—and an invasion.

Oops: After a three-month search of Iraq, “‘Team Pox’ turned up only signs to the contrary: disabled equipment that had been rendered harmless by UN inspectors, Iraqi scientists deemed credible who gave no indication they had worked with smallpox, and a laboratory thought to be back in use that was covered in cobwebs,” reported the Associated Press in September 2003.¹¹

Scoop: “Illicit Arms Kept Till Eve of War, an Iraqi Scientist Is Said to Assert,” by Judith Miller, April 21, 2003. In this front-page article, Miller quotes an American military officer who passes on the assertions of “a man who said he was an Iraqi scientist” in U.S. custody. The “scientist” claims that Iraq destroyed its WMD stockpile days before the war began, that the regime had transferred banned weapons to Syria, and that Saddam Hussein was working closely with Al Qaeda.

Who is the messenger for this bombshell? Miller tells us only that she “was permitted to see him from a distance at the sites where he said that material from the arms program was buried. Clad in nondescript clothes and a baseball cap, he pointed to several spots in the sand where he said chemical precursors and other weapons material were buried.”

And then there were the terms of this disclosure: “This reporter was not permitted to interview the scientist or visit his home. Nor was she permitted to write about the discovery of the scientist for three days, and the copy was then submitted for a check by military officials. Those officials asked that details of what chemicals were uncovered be deleted.”

No proof. No names. No chemicals. Only a baseball cap—and the credibility of Miller and the *Times*—to vouch for a “scientist” who conveniently backs up key claims of the Bush administration.

Miller, who was embedded with MET Alpha, a military unit

searching for WMDs, pumped up her sensational assertions the next day on PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*:

Q. Has the unit you've been traveling with found any proof of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

JUDITH MILLER: Well, I think they found something more than a smoking gun. What they've found . . . is a silver bullet in the form of a person, an Iraqi individual, a scientist, as we've called him, who really worked on the programs, who knows them firsthand.

Q: Does this confirm in a way the insistence coming from the U.S. government that after the war, various Iraqi tongues would loosen, and there might be people who would be willing to help?

JUDITH MILLER: Yes, it clearly does. . . . That's what the Bush administration has finally done. They have changed the political environment, and they've enabled people like the scientists that MET Alpha has found to come forth.¹²

Oops: The silver bullet got more tarnished as it was examined. Three months later, Miller acknowledged that the scientist was merely "a senior Iraqi military intelligence official." His explosive claims vaporized.

A final note from the Department of Corrections: The *Times* deeply regrets any wars or loss of life that these errors may have contributed to.

Up in Smoke

TOM WOLFE ONCE wrote about a war-happy *Times* correspondent in Vietnam (same idea, different war): The administration

was “playing [the reporter] of *The New York Times* like an ocarina, as if they were blowing smoke up his pipe and the finger work was just right and the song was coming forth better than they could have played it themselves.”¹³

But who was playing whom? *The Washington Post* reported that while Miller was embedded with MET Alpha, her role in the unit’s operations became so central that it became known as the “Judith Miller team.” In one instance, she disagreed with a decision to relocate the unit to another area and threatened to file a critical report in the *Times* about the action. When she took her protest to a two-star general, the decision was reversed. One Army officer told the *Post*, “Judith was always issuing threats of either going to *The New York Times* or to the secretary of defense. There was nothing veiled about that threat.”¹⁴

Later, she played a starring role in a ceremony in which MET Alpha’s leader was promoted. Other officers were surprised to watch as Miller pinned a new rank on the uniform of Chief Warrant Officer Richard Gonzales. He thanked her for her “contributions” to the unit.¹⁵ In April 2003, MET Alpha traveled to the compound of Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi “at Judy’s direction,” where they interrogated and took custody of an Iraqi man who was on the Pentagon’s wanted list—despite the fact that MET Alpha’s only role was to search for WMDs. As one officer told the *Post*, “It’s impossible to exaggerate the impact she had on the mission of this unit, and not for the better.”

After a year of bogus scoops from Miller, the paper gave itself a bit of cover. Not corrections—just cover. On September 28, 2003, *Times* reporter Douglas Jehl surprisingly kicked the legs out from under Miller’s sources. In his story headlined AGENCY BELITTLES INFORMATION GIVEN BY IRAQ DEFACTORS, Jehl revealed:

An internal assessment by the Defense Intelligence Agency has concluded that most of the information provided by Iraqi defectors who were made available by the Iraqi National Congress was of little or no value, according to federal officials briefed on the arrangement.

In addition, several Iraqi defectors introduced to American intelligence agents by the exile organization and its leader, Ahmed Chalabi, invented or exaggerated their credentials as people with direct knowledge of the Iraqi government and its suspected unconventional weapons program, the officials said.

The Iraqi National Congress had made some of these defectors available to . . . *The New York Times*, which reported their allegations about prisoners and the country's weapons program.

Poof. Up in smoke went thousands of words of what can only be called rank propaganda.

This *Times* confession was too little, too late. After an unnecessary war, during a brutal occupation, and several thousand lives later, the *Times* obliquely acknowledged that it had been recycling disinformation. Miller's reports played an invaluable role in the administration's propaganda war. They gave public legitimacy to outright lies, providing what appeared to be independent confirmation of wild speculation and false accusations. "What Miller has done over time seriously violates several *Times*' policies under their code of conduct for news and editorial departments," wrote William E. Jackson in *Editor & Publisher*. "Jayson Blair was only a fluke deviation. . . . Miller strikes right at the core of the regular functioning news machine."¹⁶

More than that, Miller's false reporting was key to justifying a war.

And the *Times*' unabashed servitude to the administration's war agenda did not end with Iraq.

On September 16, 2003, the *Times* ran a story headlined SENIOR U.S. OFFICIAL TO LEVEL WEAPONS CHARGES AGAINST SYRIA. The stunningly uncritical article was virtually an excerpt of the testimony about to be given that day by outspoken hawk John R. Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control. The article included this curious caveat: The testimony "was provided to *The New York Times* by individuals who feel that the accusations against Syria have received insufficient attention." The article certainly solved that problem.

The author? Judith Miller—preparing for the next battlefield.

Protesters? What Protesters?

ON OCTOBER 26, 2002, the *Democracy Now!* crew headed to Washington, D.C., to cover a major protest against an attack on Iraq. Although the police in Washington, D.C., no longer issue official estimates of crowd size, they told us unofficially that there were between 150,000 and 200,000 people.

The next day, *The New York Times* reported that "fewer people had attended than organizers had hoped for . . . even though the sun came out." NPR reported "fewer than 10,000" showed up.

It was clear to all of us who were actually *there* (more on this in a moment), including the police, that the size of the crowd was significant. In addition to our broadcast on Pacifica, C-SPAN was carrying the protest live. Anyone watching from home could clearly see the masses of people. And not all media outlets misreported the event. *The Washington Post* headline was ANTIWAR PROTEST LARGEST SINCE '60S; ORGANIZERS SAY 100,000 TURNED OUT.

The *Times* had gotten it so wrong that we had to ask: Was the reporter even there?

Democracy Now! producer Mike Burke got on the case. He recognized the people quoted in the *Times* article: They had spoken at a press conference a few days earlier. So he tracked down each person quoted in the story. There was an MIT professor, a student from the University of North Carolina, and Eli Pariser, a staff person with the organization MoveOn.org.

Pariser confirmed that the *Times* reporter had interviewed him a few days earlier. The MIT professor told Mike the same thing.

The UNC student said, “She did interview me at the rally—on my cell phone. I asked her why she wasn’t here. She said she was working on another story.” It turns out that the *Times* reporter covering the rally was pulled away to work on the Washington sniper story that day.

Now, we all know that the *Times* has an army of reporters it could deploy to cover any story, but it’s a matter of what they care about and where they decide to put their resources.

Three days later, *The New York Times* ran another story on the same protest. The headline declared that the rally “is said to invigorate antiwar movement.”

“The turnout startled even organizers, who had taken out permits for 20,000 marchers,” stated this new, improved *Times* report. “They expected 30 buses, and were surprised by about 650, coming from as far as Nebraska and Florida.” The article continued, “The demonstration on Saturday in Washington drew 100,000 by police estimates and 200,000 by organizers’.” An accompanying photo caption noted that the rally was “the biggest antiwar protest since the Vietnam War era.”

Who do you believe: *The New York Times* . . . or *The New York Times*?

Democracy Now! attempted to question the reporter and her

editors at the *Times* about their coverage, but the *Times* declined to comment. Finally, after we did our show on the misreporting, the reporter called us and confirmed that she had left the protest before it had even started. She had seen only the early crowds trickling in, not the actual demonstration. When she realized that the rally was much bigger, she called in a correction to her editors, but they didn't change the numbers.

Numerous people who attended or watched the rallies called both NPR and the *Times* to complain. On October 30, NPR ran an on-air correction. Host Robert Siegel stated: "We erroneously reported on *All Things Considered* that the size of the crowd was fewer than 10,000. While Park Service employees gave no official estimate, it is clear that the crowd was substantially larger than that. . . . We apologize for the error."

After *Democracy Now!* ran a story on the rally article discrepancies, producer Kris Abrams asked a *Times* editor, "Why didn't you print a correction stating that your first article was wrong?"

Because we didn't make a mistake, he replied.

"Well, what do you call it, then?" she asked.

A matter of emphasis, he answered.