

Friedman on Iraq—the “thinking” behind the New York Times’s debacle

By Bill Van Auken
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Over the past week, the *New York Times* has carried pages of self-examination, mea culpas and even sharp criticism in response to the deepening debacle surrounding the case of its senior correspondent, Judith Miller.

The newspaper, which has long presented itself as the paper of record for America’s liberal establishment, has been thoroughly discredited by the Miller affair. The recent revelations regarding the investigation into the Bush administration’s leaking of the identity of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame have implicated the newspaper in a criminal state conspiracy aimed at intimidating political dissent and silencing opposition to the war in Iraq.

The newspaper suppressed information from its readers in order to protect the relationship between Miller and her co-thinkers within the administration, with whom she collaborated in making the phony “weapons of mass destruction” case for the unprovoked invasion of Iraq.

On Sunday, the *Times* published a critique by its public editor Byron Calame, who condemned “the deferential treatment of Ms. Miller by editors who failed to dig into problems before they became a mess.”

In addition to this special treatment, Calame cited the failure of the editors to own up to Miller’s false reporting—which mirrored the administration’s fraudulent claims—on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction for more than a year after it became obvious that no such weapons ever existed.

“The paper should have addressed the problems of the coverage sooner,” said Calame. “It is the duty of the paper to be straight with its readers, and whatever the management reason was for not doing so, the readers didn’t get a fair shake.”

The newspaper also published an internal email from its executive editor Bill Keller, who acknowledged, “By waiting a year to own up to our mistakes, I allowed the anger inside and outside the paper to fester.” As an alibi, Keller claimed that, after he assumed the editorship in the wake of the overblown controversy surrounding the comparatively insignificant journalistic misconduct of junior reporter Jayson Blair, “It felt somehow unsavory to begin my tenure by attacking the previous regime... I feared the WMD issue could become a crippling distraction.”

The reality is that the reluctance to “come clean” with its readers about its role in publishing lies about Iraqi WMD stemmed from the newspaper’s—and Keller’s own—support for the Iraq war. It is the catastrophic failure of this imperialist military adventure that

has plunged not only the newspaper, but the Bush administration and the American political establishment as a whole into deep crisis.

Miller’s false reporting and intimate collaboration with administration officials were integral to the role played by the newspaper in manufacturing an ostensibly liberal perspective designed to bolster the shabby pretexts advanced by the Bush administration for the war.

This perspective was elaborated in its most finished form in the cynical columns of the *Times’s* foreign affairs columnist, Thomas Friedman.

In the midst of the furor over Miller, Friedman has, not coincidentally, felt compelled to defend this perspective against what he acknowledges is a “ton of mail” attacking his support for the war. He did so October 15 in an online statement entitled, “On Iraq: What was I Thinking? Here’s What.”

Friedman’s attempt “to explain where I was, and am, coming from” is riddled with absurdities and internal contradictions. It reveals the cowardly and utterly unprincipled outlook that underlay the decision of the self-styled liberals of the *New York Times* to support the war.

Friedman explains that he did not embrace the “neo-con drumbeat to invade Iraq” that began more than a decade before the war itself. Yet, he became convinced “that the Bush team was going to invade Iraq no matter who was against it—Congress, columnists or whatever.”

He declares himself “flattered that some people think my column was so influential that had I come out against the war, it would have made a difference.” He hastens to add, “It would have made no difference.”

This modesty is both false and self-serving. Friedman is arguably the most influential columnist writing for the most influential newspaper in the United States, yet he asserts that nothing he wrote could have made the slightest difference in the Bush administration’s war plans.

This is absurd on its face. If the Bush administration was so indifferent to the role of the media, why did it exert such effort to concoct its bogus pretexts, orchestrating a media campaign for war led by the *Times’s* Judith Miller? Why did it then go to such lengths to muzzle the reporting on the war itself, with the introduction of “embedded journalists?”

Moreover, Friedman ignores the far-reaching implications of his own rationalizations. To claim that the Bush administration can

launch a war in open defiance of the press and the public is to acknowledge the collapse of democracy and the existence of a presidential dictatorship. He, of course, draws no such conclusion.

In fact, the media's response was very much part of the administration's calculations, and Friedman and the *Times* fell right into line.

Having concluded that nothing he wrote would stop the war, Friedman tells us, he assumed a new and novel mission: "Because I believed that if this war were mounted in the right way for the right reasons, it could have a truly important outcome, I wanted to use my column to do what little I could to try to tilt the administration to fight the right war, the right way."

What was the "right war?" It was a war to "produce a decent government in the heart of the Arab-Muslim world."

Friedman acknowledges that the Bush administration launched the war based upon lies. "I never believed or wrote," he states, "that invading Iraq on the pretext of WMD was legitimate"—though that is precisely what happened.

He admits that the administration carried out the war in complete contempt for the will of the American people or any consideration for the constitutionally-mandated role of Congress—not to mention the opinion of lowly columnists. Yet, he insists that somehow this criminal enterprise could have been "tilted" into a crusade for the democratization of the Middle East.

Having concluded he could do nothing to stop the war, Friedman instead dedicated himself to the political alchemy of turning military aggression by a government that has demolished democratic processes in the US itself into an instrument for bringing democracy to the people of Iraq.

Friedman writes that he believed "Iraq was so important that, as a columnist, I was going to set my own personal politics aside... I checked my politics at the door." He adds, "What I so resented—and anyone who wants to call me naïve on this is fully justified—was that the Bush people never checked their politics at the door..."

Naïve is not really the word that comes to mind. Corrupt and deceitful might be closer to the mark. What were the "politics" that Friedman "checked at the door?" Essentially, it was his obligation as a journalist to tell the truth. He knew that the war was based upon lies, yet he endeavored to portray it as some kind of noble enterprise.

As for the "politics" that the Bush administration failed to check, Friedman is referring not to its right-wing militarism and contempt for democracy, but rather the lowest common denominator of corruption, cronyism and incompetence.

He objects that they "sent many political hacks to run post-war Baghdad" and repeats his claim that things would have been different if only more troops had been used.

But where do these "politics" come from? Hacks were sent because the Bush administration—having launched a criminal venture whose nature it attempted to hide from the American people—required political loyalty above all.

As for the number of troops, this is an issue that highlights the delusional character of the perspective advanced by Friedman and other "liberal" supporters of the war. The military is already stretched to the breaking point, with every combat unit either

deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan or preparing to deploy. Doubling the "boots on the ground," as he once put it, would require the conscription of hundreds of thousands of youth into the military, something that the Bush administration well knows would provoke massive opposition and unleash a profound political crisis in the US.

In the end, Friedman writes that "anyone who says I should have known before the war that these guys would never deliver the kind of war I advocated has a point." He quickly adds, however, that he still has a "glimmer of hope that we can get a decent outcome in Iraq" and therefore will continue to support the war.

Whom does Friedman think he is kidding? It was never a matter of getting the criminals in the Bush White House to "deliver" a war for justice and democracy. Rather, it was the role of Friedman and the *Times* to deliver a democratic pretext for the war that could be, and was, used by the administration once the lies about weapons of mass destruction—also promoted by the *Times*—were exposed.

The war in Iraq has not been kind to the erstwhile liberals of the media. It has exposed them as well as every other political institution of American capitalism—the Democratic Party, Congress, the corporations—as corrupt and complicit in an act of aggression aimed at seizing oil and strategic advantage for the benefit of the relative handful of people who make up America's financial elite. The result has been the deaths of over 100,000 Iraqis and 2,000 American soldiers.

The deepening crisis of the Bush administration only deepens the crisis of its ostensible political opponents within the Democratic Party and the "liberal" press as well, as the Miller affair has demonstrated so concretely.

The mass opposition within the American public to the war in Iraq has emerged in spite of and in opposition to the war propaganda and systematic misinformation spread by the *Times* and the rest of the media. As the movement against the war develops from below, it will hold accountable not only those who conspired to launch it, but also those who lied and covered up in order to justify and continue it.

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