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Judith Miller, the media and the warfare state

More than any other New York Times reporter, Judith Miller took the lead with stories claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Now, a few years later, she's facing heightened scrutiny in the aftermath of a pair of articles that appeared in the Times on Sunday – a lengthy investigative piece about Miller plus her own first-person account of how she got entangled in the case of the Bush administration's "outing" of Valerie Plame as a CIA agent.

It now seems that Miller functioned with more accountability to U.S. military intelligence officials than to New York Times editors. Most of the way through her article, Miller slipped in this sentence: "During the Iraq war, the Pentagon had given me clearance to see secret information as part of my assignment 'embedded' with a special military unit hunting for unconventional weapons." And, according to the same article, she ultimately told the grand jury that during a July 8, 2003, meeting with the vice president's chief of staff, Lewis Libby, "I might have expressed frustration to Mr. Libby that I was not permitted to discuss with editors some of the more sensitive information about Iraq."

Let's replay that one again in slow motion.

Judith Miller is a reporter for the New York Times. After the invasion, on assignment to cover a U.S. military unit as it searches for WMDs in Iraq, she's given "clearance" by the Pentagon "to see secret information" – which she "was not permitted to discuss" with Times editors.

There's nothing wrong with this picture if Judith Miller is an intelligence operative for the U.S. government. But if she's supposed to be a journalist, this is a preposterous situation – and the fact that the New York Times has tolerated it tells us a lot about that newspaper.

Notably, the front-page story about Miller in the Times on Sunday bypassed Miller's "clearance" status and merely reported: "In the spring of 2003, Ms. Miller returned from covering the war in Iraq, where she had been embedded with an American military team searching unsuccessfully for evidence of nuclear, chemical and biological

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weapons.”

In effect, during the propaganda buildup for the invasion of Iraq, while Miller was the paper’s lead reporter on weapons of mass destruction, the New York Times news department served as a key asset of the warfare state.

“WMD – I got it totally wrong,” the Times quoted Miller as saying in a Friday interview. “The analysts, the experts and the journalists who covered them – we were all wrong. If your sources are wrong, you are wrong.”

But analysts, experts and journalists were not “all wrong.” Some very experienced weapons inspectors – including Mohamed ElBaradei, Hans Blix and Scott Ritter – challenged key assertions from the White House. Well before the invasion, many other analysts also disputed various aspects of the U.S. government’s claims about WMDs in Iraq. (For examples, see archived news releases put out by my colleagues at the Institute for Public Accuracy – www.accuracy.org – in 2002 and early 2003.) Meanwhile journalists at some British newspapers, including the Independent and the Guardian, raised tough questions that were virtually ignored by mainstream U.S. reporters in the Washington press corps.

Reporters select sources – and the unnamed ones that Miller chose to rely on, like the Pentagon’s pet Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi, were predictably eager to spin tales about WMDs in order to fuel momentum for an invasion. Yet the official line at the New York Times has been that its news department was fooled with the rest of the media best.

On May 26, 2004 – more than a year after the invasion of Iraq – the Times published a belated semi-mea-culpa article by two top editors, including executive editor Bill Keller. The piece contended that the Times, along with policy makers in Washington, were victims rather than perpetrators: “Administration officials now acknowledge that they sometimes fell for misinformation from these exile sources. So did many news organizations – in particular, this one.”

But the Times did not “fall for misinformation” as much as jump for it. The newspaper eagerly helped the administration portray deceptions as facts.

The carnage set loose by those deceptions is continuing every day. But the Times’ extensive Sunday coverage of its own machinations, with Judith Miller at the center of the intrigue, had nothing to say about the human consequences in Iraq.

In elite medialand, the careers of journalists at the New York Times loom large. In contrast, the lives of American soldiers – and especially the lives of Iraqis – are more like abstractions while the breathless accounts of press palace intrigues unfold.

The apex of the Times hierarchy has provided no indication of personal remorse or

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institutional accountability. And the next time agenda-setting for U.S. military action – against Iran or Syria or wherever – shifts into high gear, it's very unlikely that the New York Times or other top-tier U.S. media outlets will present major roadblocks.

On June 14, 2003, shortly before he was promoted to the job of executive editor at the New York Times, the newspaper published an essay by Bill Keller that explained why the U.S. government should strive to improve the quality of its intelligence. "The truth is that the information-gathering machine designed to guide our leaders in matters of war and peace shows signs of being corrupted," he wrote. "To my mind, this is a worrisome problem, but not because it invalidates the war we won. It is a problem because it weakens us for the wars we still face."

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com