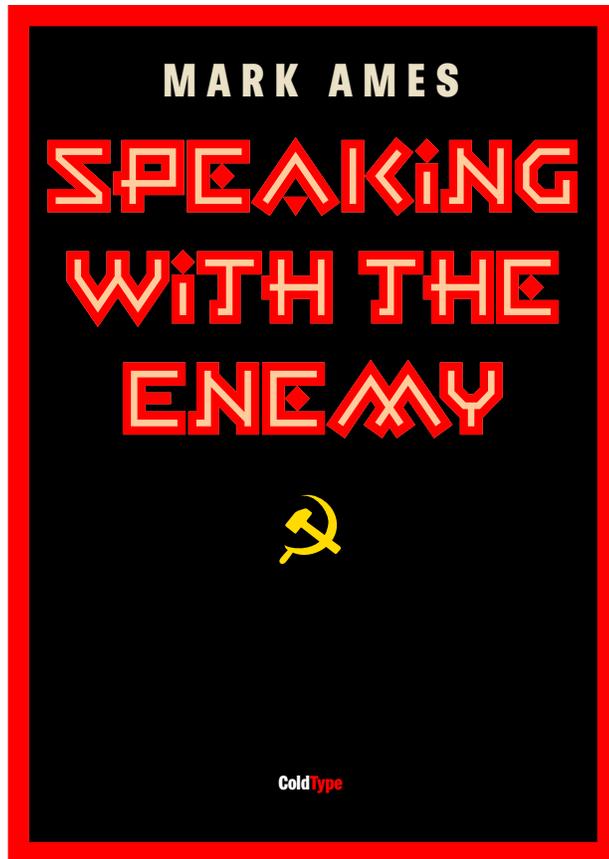


MARK AMES

SPEAKING
WITH THE
ENEMY



ColdType



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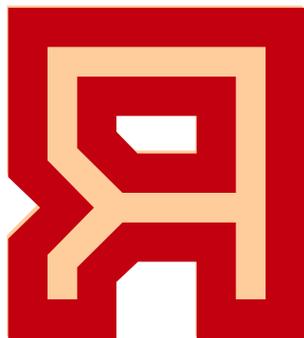
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MARK HAMES « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

“Freedom of speech is never an issue when a popular person expresses an acceptable point of view. It is of real value only because it guarantees us access to the unpopular, espousing the unacceptable. Then, we can reject or accept it, condemn it or embrace it. No one should have the authority to make that decision for us. Not our government, and certainly not somebody else's.”

– Ted Koppel, ending the Nightline interview with Shamil Basayev, July 28, 2005

“[I]f I’m running a war and I’ve got representatives of ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, MSNBC, Al Jazeera, and the BBC, and they’re out there with my troops and they’ve got the technical capacity to feed back what is happening live, so that the folks who are sitting in Baghdad have only to turn on their set to CNN and they can see what’s happening on the front lines from the American vantage point – I’m saying it would be criminal to permit that.” – Ted Koppel, Media Law Resource Center 2nd Annual Dinner Celebration, November 13, 2002



ussia’s hysterical protest against the Nightline interview with Shamil Basayev offered up a rare opportunity for Americans on the left and right to unite and celebrate our deepest cultural virtues. The story was almost too perfect. A villain – the Kremlin – who needs no complicated explanation beyond a “Soviet” or “authoritarian” modifier to drudge up the old archetype. The hero – America’s religious commitment to free speech – is immediately understood by all. The object of the Kremlin-American clash – Shamil Basayev, the Chechen warlord/terrorist who masterminded several spectacular terror attacks in Russia, including the one in Beslan last year that left nearly 350 people, mostly children, dead – is a mere backdrop to this tale. After all, Basayev doesn’t threaten America, and he even seems to like us. It’s the Kremlin that’s the real villain.

To recap: On July 28th, Nightline ran an interview with Basayev conducted by Radio Liberty reporter and Russian dissident Andrei Babitsky. The Russian government officially protested the broadcast, first by appealing to the U.S. government to pressure ABC not to run the interview, and afterwards, lashing out pub-

MARK AMES « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

licly and through diplomatic channels. Within days, Russia's Defense Ministry declared a boycott of ABC, and on August 2nd, the government announced that it would not be renewing ABC's accreditation in Moscow, effectively shutting down their operations.

The White House's response was morally unassailable. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters, "The U.S. Government has no authority to prevent ABC from exercising its constitutional right to broadcast the interview." A few days later, Tom Casey, acting spokesman for the State Department, added, "[W]e believe that ABC as well as all other members of the media should have the opportunity for freedom of expression and have the right to report as they see fit."

A strange thing happened right after Casey said that – dozens of winged primates burst out of his ass, flew around the briefing room screeching and tearing at people's hair, then escaped through an open window. Not a single American reporter saw it happen. They were too busy preparing yet another story about Russia's return to the bad old days, like this New York Times lead published August 2: "Russia announced Tuesday that it was barring journalists from ABC News from working here, effectively expelling a foreign news organization for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union."

The Washington Post agreed, darkly warning, in an August 7 editorial hysterically titled, "Russia to ABC: Drop Dead," that the Kremlin reaction was "in keeping with the Putin government's increasing intolerance for dissent, especially where Russia's brutal, decade-long war in Chechnya is concerned. When this government is faced with any critical message, its instinctive reaction is to bully and intimidate the messenger."

Imagine that! In our day and age!

The only people who spotted those Foggy Bottom flying ass-monkeys were Russia's state-controlled media personalities, some of the oiliest sycophants to ever appear on any television screen. It's a sad day when these creeps are the only ones who see through the bullshit: They cried hypocrisy, juxtaposing the Bush administration's official piety against its darker actions.

DOUBLE STANDARD? WHAT DOUBLE STANDARD?

It may seem strange that Russians have a better memory about recent American

MARK RAMES « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

government interference in the media, so just in case you're one of those who suffers from selective amnesia, here is what the Russian media barked about in the days following the Nightline interview. A long, long time ago – October, 2001 to be exact – Condoleeza Rice, then-head of the National Security Council, telephoned the heads of the major American television news organizations and warned them not to broadcast a fresh video recording announcement by Osama bin Laden.

The White House's reasoning? As Ari Fleisher put it in a press conference, "At best Osama bin Laden's message is propaganda, calling on people to kill Americans. At worst he could be issuing orders to his followers to initiate such attacks." (For comparison, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused the Nightline interview with Basayev of "supporting the propaganda of terrorism" and containing "direct vocal calls for violence against Russian citizens.")

The independent American media's response to Rice's "suggestion" was an overwhelming "Jawohl!" Fox, MSNBC and CNN yanked the bin Laden video completely, while CBS, NBC and ABC agreed to "screen" all Al Qaeda video messages. The reasoning? As CNN's Judy Woodruff explained, "We are Americans, too. We care about this country." A Pew Research Center poll showed that majority of American were marching right along with Woodruff: Fifty-two percent said they believed that the American news media should withhold videotaped speeches made by bin Laden. In other words, it's American to censor dangerous propaganda. Unless, of course, it's only dangerous to someone else. In which case, it's American to stand up for free speech, no matter how unpleasant.

Even the recent Christian Science Monitor editorial condemning Russia made a special "Condi-Rice-Phone-Call" caveat to its overall pro-free-speech moralizing: "Should terrorists be given air time? Not if they secretly send messages to accomplices or go unchallenged during an interview... ABC's interview of rebel leader Shamil Basayev didn't fit that category."

They wouldn't do it again though, would they?

Right around the time that America's television media agreed to censor Al Qaeda's statements, Al Jazeera's Kabul bureau managed to get the scoop of the decade: an interview with Osama himself, with the indirect participation of CNN. It was the first and only post-9/11 interview with Enemy Number One. And the U.S. didn't want it shown. Vice President Cheney flew to Qatar that same month

MARK OMEZ « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

– and whattaya know, Al Jazeera quashed the bin Laden interview because, it later claimed, the interview was “not newsworthy.” It also agreed to withhold portions of Al Qaeda’s video statements that month.

The Bush Administration was on a roll. Flush with the successful censorship of its own media and the media in other countries, it went a step further by accidentally bombing Al Jazeera’s bureau in Kabul, and later, during the Iraq invasion, accidentally bombing their bureaus in Basra and Baghdad, accidentally killing one of their journalists, before eventually throwing the news organization out of the country. Several Al Jazeera journalists have been arrested, tortured, or killed by American forces.

Indeed since the invasion, Americans have killed and arrested dozens of Arab reporters working for various news organizations, most recently Yasser Salihee, a Knight-Ridder correspondent who was killed by an American sniper while investigating American-backed death squads in Iraq.

The Bush Administration scored its most recent victory over the “independent” media when it bullied Newsweek into retracting its Koran-defiling story. This feat was widely reported on Russian television as another damning bit of evidence that the Kremlin’s media management is the norm in the free world – so there is nothing to worry about in Russia.

Like many authoritarian regimes around the world, the Kremlin successfully uses these numerous examples of America’s own brutal reaction to dangerous journalism in order to show its citizens that managing the media is perfectly normal – one reason why a majority of Russians support censorship.

At this point it’s hard to resist repeating the quote from the Washington Post editorial criticizing the Kremlin’s attack on ABC: “When this government is faced with any critical message, its instinctive reaction is to bully and intimidate the messenger.” But one resists, because ... well ... it would be unpatriotic to point out American hypocrisy at a time of war.

Any similarity to recent events in America is purely coincidental

At a recent State Department press briefing, a reporter asked McCormick about this glaring double standard. The exchange, printed on the State Department web site, is worth quoting in full:

QUESTION: On this issue, I mean, you know, you’re constantly – U.S.

MARK OMEZ « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

Government officials are constantly complaining about what Al Jazeera airs or doesn't and so on. So do you express the same kind of concern with ABC in this case, promoting, inciting, and so on?

MR. McCORMACK: Well, I'm not going to try to draw any equivalence between what . . .

QUESTION: No, I'm not . . .

MR. McCORMACK: . . . between what Al Jazeera has aired in the past in different places concerning the actions in Iraq, concerning misleading broadcasting – misleading information, misrepresenting different activities. It's a completely separate issue from an American media outlet deciding to broadcast this interview.

QUESTION: Would the U.S. Government have any objection to a U.S. network interviewing Usama bin Laden?

MR. McCORMACK: Again, I think that different networks, American media networks, have aired portions of tapes released by Usama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri, as well as others. Very, very early on, after September 11th, we asked broadcast networks to take into consideration that these messages might contain signals or other types of information to other terrorist cells, but we made it very clear at that time that that was a matter for and solely the decision of the broadcast networks and the media outlets to decide what it was that they were going to – what it was that they were going to air. To my knowledge, that's been the extent of our conversations with the media concerning broadcast of tapes, messages, et cetera, from Usama bin Laden and al-Qaida members.

QUESTION: Is there any concern that there could have been such a signal involved in the ABC interview with the Chechen?

MR. McCORMACK: I'm not aware of any, Saul.

Aside from the reporter's hilarious apology for comparing the two ("No, I'm not . . ."), McCormack's last comment is the real punchline. In 2001, White House officials admitted that they didn't know if the Osama tapes which they wanted censored contained coded messages to terrorists. They simply speculated that they

MARK OMEZ « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

“might,” to use McCormack’s wording. In the Basayev interview, on the other hand, McCormick was “not aware of any” coded messages. Did you catch the difference? “Might” is grounds for government censorship, but being “not aware” is clearly not. “Might”; “might not.” It’s like a bad playground argument.

And yet, the Nightline interview with Basayev did contain a highly uncoded message that the Russians found particularly infuriating: When asked if he was planning more terror acts like the Beslan massacre, Basayev answered, “I’m making plans. We’re always looking for new ways.” That did not go down well with the Russians, who have lost more citizens to terror attacks over the past decade than any country – until America occupied Iraq.

RUSSIAN SKEPTICISM VS. AMERICAN SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

The dispute between Russian and America over the Nightline interview is, on a certain level, a classic comedy of misunderstandings. The Russians, culturally skeptical to the point of cynicism, genuinely believe that only a fool or a liar would deny the White House’s powerful influence over American media, dismissing all this talk of a separation of media and government as mere cultural propaganda not meant to be taken seriously by those “in the know.” Their attitude is sort of, “Come on guys, we’re willing to humor all this free speech crap for protocol purposes, but right now we need to get serious. What’s your price?”

It is this Russian skepticism that offends Americans more than anything – because Americans want everyone else to believe the same delusions they do. The fact that Russia leaned on the U.S. government to pressure ABC, rather than confining their protests directly to ABC itself (thereby maintaining the fiction that the government is unable to influence them), struck right at the heart of America’s cultural fiction about a separation of government and media.

This violation of the playground rules sent America’s media elite into their own version of hysterics, knee-jerking against Russia’s behavior by first and foremost emphasizing, “We’d never ever do this, we’re better than you!” – as if knowing, somewhere deep in the back of their collective mind, that what the Russians did was all-too-familiar. The Baltimore Sun called the Kremlin’s behavior “childish,” while the Washington Post whined, “It was especially telling that the Kremlin’s first impulse after the program aired was to summon the top U.S. diplomat in Moscow to lodge an official protest, as if the Bush administration exercised con-

MARK OMEZ « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

trol over broadcast decisions by U.S. media. Sorry, guys, that's not the way it works here.”

Amazingly, this sense of wounded anger even extended to Ann Cooper, the executive director of the Committee Without Borders. She argued that the protest over Nightline's interview “exposes the Kremlin's failure to comprehend that – in sharp contrast with Russia – U.S. television operates independently of government.”

Yet Cooper, a former NPR correspondent in Moscow, failed to consider the most obvious reason why the Russians appealed directly to the U.S. government: the reporter who did the interview, Andrei Babitsky, is a longtime employee of Radio Liberty. In other words, he's a U.S. government employee!

WHAT DID THE U.S. KNOW, AND WHEN?

Babitsky, a Russian citizen, has worked out of Radio Liberty's Prague bureau for the past four years. He moved there after repeated harassment at the hands of Russian security forces due to his controversial coverage of the Chechen conflict, which was deemed too sympathetic to the rebels and too focused on Russian brutality. In 2000, he was detained and “disappeared” into Russian filtration camps in what most believe was a deliberate attempt approved at the very top (i.e. by Putin) to punish Babitsky.

Why would the Russians be so sensitive over Radio Liberty reports? Consider its past: Radio Liberty was founded in 1949 and run by the CIA as part of its psy-ops campaign against the Soviets. The umbrella organization that ran Radio Liberty also started Radio Free Afghanistan in the 1980s, beaming anti-Soviet, pro-mujahedeen propaganda. So from the Kremlin's point of view, critical Radio Liberty reports out of Chechnya had an all-too-familiar and sinister odor.

How to explain away this obvious U.S. government connection to the Basayev interview? Slapstick comedy: Babitsky claimed that he was “on leave” from Radio Liberty when he arranged the interview, meaning, by some strange playground logic, the U.S. government had no involvement. Nope, none at all.

Donald Jensen, Radio Liberty's director of communications, backed up Babitsky's excuse: “In the second half of June, Babitsky was officially on holiday,” he told RIA-Novosti. “He could have traveled to California to have a rest, stayed in Prague, but now we know that he traveled to Russia.” In other words, his

MARK OMEZ « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

employer only found out after the vacation what Babitsky was doing. “When an employee is on holiday, he chooses and decides himself where he should be.” Ah yes, America is a land of free choices! Jensen told the interviewer that Radio Liberty only found out about Babitsky’s interview from ABC, after they acquired the video.

Think about this again. Babitsky would have needed plenty of time to arrange the interview – which involved planning the harrowing logistics, crossing several borders by car (at times blindfolded), safety assurances, technical assistance and so on. We’re to believe that he never once told his longtime employer – an American government organization which may or may not still be a CIA operation – what he planned to do during his “vacation,” even though it was clear from Russia’s past behavior that the interview would cause a major scandal? And the reason he didn’t tell them is that everyone is free to do as they choose? You’d have to have never worked for an American organization to really believe that employees have freedom of choice. In anything.

EXPLANATION BY COMMITTEE?

Babitsky’s own account is full of contradictions. In an interview with the Moscow Times published on August 1, he “refused to disclose other details about the interview, citing instructions he had received from his superiors” at Radio Liberty. This suggests that they were more clued in than they let on. Yet in subsequent interviews, Babitsky said he arranged the interview while on vacation. I didn’t know that government employees cease to be government employees while on vacation – does this mean that President Bush, the next time he’s on vacation, can, for example, split for Amsterdam for a relaxing red-light-district binge, just so long as he gave two weeks’ notice? Cuz you know, it’s really no one’s business what he does while on vacation – it’s a free country, by gum!

Babitsky’s account gets even sillier: In the Nightline piece he claimed that he thought he had arranged to interview the Chechen rebel vice president, Doku Umarov, and was “surprised” when instead, he was brought to Basayev. “I want to say that the meeting was totally unexpected ... I realized the consequences I’ll have to deal with. I understood immediately that the Russian authorities would definitely charge me with collaborating with a terrorist.” Yet after the Russian

MARK AMES « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

authorities reacted angrily, he told the Moscow Times that he claimed that he was shocked by the Foreign Ministry's decision to withdraw ABC's accreditation.

So Babitsky's story is this: He arranged this hugely controversial interview without the knowledge of his government employer because he was on vacation; his employer never inquired where he was going for his vacation; all the plans were arranged presumably in off-hours and out of range of his fellow RFE/RL employees; he didn't plan to interview Basayev, it wasn't his fault; he knew there would be consequences, but was shocked when he learned how bad the consequences really were. Monkeys ... ass ... wings ...

These contradictions and absurdities are relevant not because they discredit Babitsky – his bravery should be the envy of any serious journalist, and his interview deserved to be broadcast, just as Osama's interviews did too – but because they strongly suggest that the U.S. government knew that one of their employees was going to interview Basayev, and that they knew that it would cause problems for all sorts of reasons. So they covered up their involvement with the kinds of lazy excuses so transparently lame that they would get most children sent to their room without dinner.

That is why the Russian government appealed directly to the U.S. government to stop ABC from airing the interview. Not because they “failed to comprehend that the U.S. television operates independently of the government,” but because the U.S. government is, particularly in this case, the most powerful influence of all.

OF COURSE THE RUSSIANS WERE ANGRY

To better understand the Russian position, it helps to recall that the United States recently gave political asylum to Ilyas Akhmadov, the “foreign minister” of the Chechen separatist government-in-exile. One of the first controversial moves by the Bush Administration was to allow a ranking State Department official, John Beyrle, to meet with Akhmadov in February, 2001, breaking precedent with the Clinton Administration, which kept a much greater distance from the Chechen rebels. Today, Akhmadov is a fellow at the government-funded National Endowment for Democracy in Washington.

Robert Bruce Ware, associate professor and expert on the North Caucasus at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, explained the Russian position this

MARK OMEZ « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

way: “In order for Americans to appreciate the Russian position, they should try to imagine how they would feel, and what they would do, if Russia granted political asylum to the Taliban’s foreign minister, set him up in a prestigious professional position at the expense of the Russian government, and then broadcast an interview with Osama bin Laden in which he threatened more attacks upon the United States. Then imagine that the journalist interviewing bin Laden is on the payroll of the Russian government, since Andrei Babitsky was working for the Voice of America when he interviewed Basayev.”

One wonders how much aluminum the American public has absorbed into their bloodstream to forget all this and maintain, with genuine outrage, their pious belief that we operate under a clear separation of government and independent media, in contrast to the evil Russkies?

THE LIST THAT KEEPS ON GROWING

Here are just a few of the more obvious examples of meddling in American media:

- The government’s successful manipulation of the major media in whipping up support for its invasion of Iraq based on false information planted on leading media outlets about alleged WMD threats.
- Its strict controls on access to information in theaters of war, a policy implemented in the first Gulf War and increasingly refined ever since – a tactic that the Kremlin consciously emulated in the second Chechen war.
- Its psyops programs directly infiltrating and manipulating television news programming, such as when members of the U.S. Army 4th Psychological Operations worked for CNN and National Public Radio during the Kosovo War in order to “help in the production of news,” as Major Thomas Collins of the U.S. Army Information Service put it.
- The “Office of Strategic Influence” program that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld tried to push through in 2002, designed to plant false stories in the “international media,” including manipulating Western journalists by sending them e-mails that would plant fake ideas and stories which would bolster pro-American PR and blacken America’s enemies (the program was canceled, but likely pushed through in a more secretive budget).

MARK OMEGAS « SPEAKING WITH THE ENEMY

- The study reported by Democracy Now's Amy Goodman which showed that, in a two-week period in the lead-up to the war in Iraq, the four major nightly newscasts of ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS conducted 393 interviews about the merits of the war, only three of which were with anti-war representatives – despite polls showing nearly half of the population opposed to the war (to which Ted Koppel disingenuously replied, “Where is it written that it’s a journalist’s responsibility to go check the polls every day and see what mainstream American wants them to do?”).
- And so on ...

The real lesson of this Nightline scandal isn't that it's further proof that Russia is backsliding on civil liberties – because in all truth, Russia has been backsliding since 1993, when then-President Boris Yeltsin shelled his oppositionist parliament with tacit U.S. approval. Nor is it, as the Russians are complaining, merely a case of double-standards. The fact that the U.S. engages in many of the same underhanded and brute manipulations of the major media as Russia is no vindication of the Kremlin's thuggish behavior towards free speech. It's an indictment of both governments.

What this story reveals more than anything is the larger global trend towards increasing authoritarianism, and the shocking degree of America's collective amnesia in the face of it. This will-to-forgetfulness, in which facile piety replaces skepticism, is a crucial ingredient in creating a society that doesn't even recognize – or care – about its own government's growing control over their lives, their minds and their deaths.



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