

Spinning a war and an editor's myth

BUFFALO NEWS editor Margaret Sullivan is at it again – with another shameless round of self-adoration and praise for her paper. Columns in the mainstream press, such as her Sunday, March 9th piece, entitled, “A healthy debate, and solid information, as war comes ever closer,” are usually designed to directly counter some unspoken truth or reality. In this case, the reality that it attacks head-on is that this has been a bad month for *The News*, which has been censured for its professional transgressions in two national publications.

The more noteworthy criticism came from the prestigious *Columbia Journalism Review*, a nonpartisan industry watchdog. They slammed *The News* “for roaming too far from the journalistic range.” Their complaint centered around a book written by *The News*’ managing editor, Stephen Bell, and “sponsored by” the pro-Pataki Business Council of New York State Inc. The book, entitled, “Upstate New York: Corridor to Progress,” counters what the *Columbia Journalism Review* describes as “the grim economic realities of Upstate New York – the shut-down businesses, the lost jobs, the exodus of talent, the disappearing services,” with a rosy-colored fantasy of a coming economic boom. The Business Council’s president described Bell’s book as a “love letter.” A more honest reader would more accurately describe it as “bullshit.”

Observers see the purpose of Bell’s book as being pretty transparent – to help Governor

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Pataki's reelection campaign, which at the time Bell wrote the book, was not a certain victory. The problem is that Bell was wearing two hats. In one role, he was a pro-Pataki propagandist. In another, he managed a staff of reporters covering the governor's reelection campaign as well as a host of economic realities countered by his book – and he did this without revealing the conflict of interest to *The News'* readership. In summation, *Columbia Journalism Review* quotes local professor and on-line journalist, Bruce Jackson, editor of *The Buffalo Report*, who broke the story, writing, "When his bosses at the News okayed this extracurricular employment, did they ... ask how he could make nice for the big business lobbying organization and at the same time objectively oversee reporters who are examining the region's most recalcitrant economic, political, and ecological problems?"

The other attack against *The News* is in a piece I wrote for the Washington, D.C. based *Humanist* magazine. In that article, entitled, "What Bush didn't want you to know about Iraq," which was adapted from one of my earlier columns for Buffalo's alternative newsweekly *ArtVoice* (1/9/03), I took *News* editor Margaret Sullivan to task for a previous "audacious display of self-praise." In that instance, she wrote, "Reporters are expected to get both sides of every situation and to keep their opinions out of their news stories." I went on to explain how her paper was outright ignoring – as in not giving any coverage whatsoever – to war related stories. I didn't intend for this criticism of *The News* to go national, since I thought there'd be little interest outside of Buffalo for this part of my story. Hence, I suggested pulling *The Buffalo News* reference from my piece. The editors at *The Humanist*, however, thought it was an important example of how the media in general is failing us. Hence, we left the reference in the national story.

Is The News half empty or half full?

This brings us to the current situation. Sullivan is once again touting the public's right to know what is going on, and her paper's role in informing us, as we go off to war. She writes: "As the United States continues to move toward war against Iraq, *The News'* foremost job is to inform our readers fully and let them come to their own conclusions." In reality, however, people relying exclusively on *The Buffalo News* will never know what's going on – as *The News* won't be fully informing us. Instead, Sullivan's *Buffalo News* continues to engineer opinion by selectively withholding stories – in contradiction of their stated goals.

Regarding her paper's news coverage of the Iraq situation, Sullivan writes, "Our most important goal is to report the news, and provide factual information, without expressing a point of view." She goes on to point out that, "One of the many efforts we're making

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toward that end appears in today's paper, as a special two page report," which includes, "a timeline that traces the situation back over many decades..."

This was to be Sullivan's crown jewel of unbiased and comprehensive reportage – but instead it reads like one of George W. Bush's coloring books. It follows Saddam Hussein's life as if the recent history of Iraq was this man's biography. What is omitted from this timeline are key pieces of the Iraq-USA-UK puzzle, such as these:

Missing pieces

1920 – British take control of Iraq in wake of World War One and declare the Iraqi province of Kuwait as a separate Colonial Administrative Zone.

1932 – Britain declares Iraq independent, but keeps control of oil-rich Kuwait until 1961, when it becomes an "independent" protectorate.

1960 – CIA launched failed attempt to assassinate Iraq's leader, Brig. General Abdul Karim Kassem.

1963 – Ba'ath party succeeds in killing Kassem and seizing power in a coup. They would later lose power themselves for a short while before retaking and solidifying their control over the country.

1972 – President Nixon meets with the Shah of Iran. The Shah asks the US to arm a Kurdish rebellion in Iraq in order to distract Iraq from its border dispute with Iran.

1973 – The OPEC oil cartel succeeds in controlling the price of oil and increasing its political power over the West. Iraq is a major OPEC player.

1975 – Shah decides to cozy up with Iraq in order to increase Iran's influence within OPEC. Toward this end, he asks the US to cut all aid to the Iraqi Kurds, who are then promptly attacked and massacred by Iraq. 200,000 refugees flee Iraq. The US refuses to admit any Kurdish refugees.

1980 – Iran-Iraq war begins. US supplies both sides. 1.5 million people die.

1983 (Early November) – US Secretary of State George Shultz becomes aware of Iraq's daily use of chemical weapons against Iran.

1983 (Late November) – President Reagan orders subordinates to do "whatever is necessary" to make sure Iraq does not lose war.

1983 (December) – Donald Rumsfeld meets with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad to offer support.

1984 – US fails to condemn Iraq for use of chemical and biological weapons.

1985-1989 – US supplies Iraq with chemical and biological weapons components.

1988 – Iran-Iraq war ends. Iraq turns its weapons on Iraqi-Kurdish population, slaughtering Kurds with US-supplied chemical weapons.

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1989 – CIA asks Kuwaiti officials to provoke Iraq into attacking. Kuwait continues to pump oil from disputed oilfield on Iraqi border.

1990 – Cold war ends. Members of congress demand "peace dividend" in form of cuts to military budget and increases in spending on domestic social programs. President Bush Sr. resists military cuts while his popularity sinks from the highs he enjoyed immediately after the Panama invasion.

1990 (July 25) – US Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, tells Saddam Hussein, "We have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts like your border dispute with Kuwait," in effect giving Iraq a green light to invade Kuwait.

1990 (July 27) – President Bush Sr. opposes sanctions against Iraq for massacring Kurds.

1990 (July 31) – John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State repeats Glaspie's assertion that the US has no opinion on border disputes.

1990 (August 2) – Iraq invades Kuwait (this one actually is in *The News'* timeline).

1990-1991 – US drops 177,000 pounds of bombs on Kuwait and Iraq, in what historian William Blum calls, "The most concentrated aerial assault in the history of the world." US uses depleted uranium (atomic) weaponry and cluster bombs against Iraqi troops.

1998 – UN orders weapons inspectors out of Iraq after President Clinton threatens to bomb that country.

"Embedding" Zremski

This information alone does not tell the whole story of Iraqi-US-UK relations. But that's my point. Neither does the partial list of info-bits provided by *The News*. It's only when you combine the two lists that we begin to get a picture of what is going on. The point, here, is that Sullivan is still not living up to her responsibility as an editor – yet she's wasting a lot of valuable newsprint creating the myth that she is.

In her piece, she boasts about Jerry Zremski's role in covering the coming war. Readers of my *ArtBeat* column might recognize his name. He's the writer who undercounted anti-war demonstrators by a factor of ten. He's now being "embedded... with US Army forces" who will be entering Iraq. "Embedded" reporters train and bond with their subjects. They are under the complete control of the US military. The reports they produce will be scripted as a Bush press conference. Their main function is to produce a weird sort of entertainment as the war unfolds, distracting us with the drama of a military unit. We'll see the rockets take off, but we'll never see them land.

Killing real journalists

Reporters who have entered Iraq on their own have already had their lives threatened by

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US military commanders, with Pentagon officials recently telling European journalists that US forces will lock on their satellite-uplink signals and fire upon them. When veteran BBC war correspondent Kate Adie questioned a Pentagon official about the deadly consequences, he replied, "Who cares ... they've been warned." Of course, *The News's* Jerry Zremski will face no such problems as he files his official stories with the help of the Pentagon. But by playing by these rules, he ceases to be a journalist and *The News* ceases to be a newspaper. They're just, as media critic David Barsamian puts it, "stenographers to power."

The real problem is that the American corporate media now constitutes the most powerful anti-democratic (small "d") force on the planet – with *The Buffalo News* entrenched in the middle of this posse. Warren Buffet, the owner of *The News*, is the second richest person on the planet as of today. His money is invested in the oil/energy sector, weapons, fast food, entertainment and so on – basically all the industries *The News* often gives too easy of a ride. Some reporters, such as Jerry Zremski, relish their kiss-assive roles. Many others, however, don't – they're just playing by a set of rules they had nothing to do with establishing.

It's our job as media consumers to demand better – and if *The Buffalo News* won't provide that balanced coverage, we must find it elsewhere. Our responsibility as citizens of a democratic society demands nothing less from us. Stay informed! ●