

June 06, 2003

NEW YORK TIMES EDITORS STEP DOWN

I was barely on the road to Boston before I started getting calls for comments on the announcement of the resignation of New York Times editors Howell Raines and No. 2 Gerald Boyd. It was being treated in the press as a dark day for journalism; especially with the continued fallout from the Jayson Blair affair and its junior cousin, the Rick Bragg scandal (Bragg is a prize-winning writer who stepped down from the paper after he confessed to relying on help from interns and stringers for some of his coverage – a no-no in Timesland).

So, as many predicted and others feared, heads rolled – and not just the one of the man at the bottom or the pecking order. It was clear that there were deeper institutional problems exposed, including Raines imperial management style. He admitted as much when he spoke with Times staffers just after this real Blair Witch Project exploded on the scene largely as a result of Raines, decision to play the story with as much ink as the Times devoted to the early days of the Iraq war.

The New York Times has always worked in mysterious and high handed ways with Editors ruling the roost there in ways pro-consuls used to dominate the colonies. Many were little Saddams whose word was law. Some were known for their authoritarianism, like Abe Rosenthal who consigned his critics and dissenters to beats in the Siberia of the Bronx when they stepped out of line. Others like Joe Lelyveld, who now steps in on an interim basis, were better liked and more

inventive but also responsible for unleashing the Whitewater scandal, which never fully checked out. Today scandals like Judith Miller's semi-sourced stories on weapons of mass destruction are attracting flak from many critics.

I debated some of these issues on the New England cable network last night with a former Washington Post reporter Chris Daley who now teaches journalism at Boston University. (More on that in a minute.) Daley looked at it as case study of how things can go wrong. I saw it more as an example of how it can go right, because these editors quit as a result of a news room revolt. It was their colleagues who forced them out. This could lead to more democracy – and real diversity of content—not just pigment. If it does, that would be a good thing. As readers have heard me proclaim, I consider the Blair mess a mere misdemeanor of journalistic abuse compared to the coverage of the war in Iraq and the Bush Administration. The latter media flaws represent a felony

THE TIMES AS A BRAND

TIMES publisher Arthur S. (Pinch, not Punch) originally said he would not accept their resignations. He did so today while making reference to the Times as a brand – a corporate term – not a journalistic treasure. Clearly the business was being affected as the Times became the target of jokes on TV and attacks on the right. Conservatives smelled blood and started playing demolition derby with the Times reputation. Targeted

from without and within, it was time to cut losses. Thus they brought in the guillotine.

A sad and apologetic Jayson Blair gave his first TV interview today to the local CBS affiliate. (Can Dan Rather be far behind?) He very candidly blamed problems of substance abuse and admitted to mental illness. That was brave in my book, not special pleading. If courts make exceptions for mentally deranged criminals, can't the court of public opinion be more generous with transgressions he apparently could not control? In the end it was not his blackness or youth that was to blame but his demons. If this checks out, it is time for some compassion for Jayson Blair. Right now, he's reduced to doing sound bites while sitting on a stoop.

THE TIMES IS NOT ALONE

I ALSO spoke with Geri Schoen who strings for German news outlets. I told her I saw this as only one part of the crisis in our media system. She seemed to understand, whereas many others in the media prefer to keep the focus narrow, on the details. Not their interpretation. Believe me the Times is not the only media outlet with deep problems and ethical lapses.

THE BOSTON GLOBE HONORS ONE OF ITS OWN

I WAS sorry that some unexpected dental surgery kept me from getting to Bean Town earlier, I would have loved to pay my last respects to the late Boston Globe correspondent Elizabeth Neuffer. On the Boston Phoenix web site, Dan Kennedy wrote movingly about the memorial service. On a day considered dark by much of the US media, perhaps we should honor one of its bright lights:

“A worthy send-off for a great journalist. Hundreds of people turned out this morning at the JFK Library for a memorial service for the Boston Globe’s Elizabeth Neuffer, who – along with her translator, Waleed Khalifa Hassan Al Dulaimi – were killed in a car accident in Iraq on May 9.

Editorial-page editor Renée Loth presided over a program that included remembrances by editor Marty Baron, former Ambassador Swanee Hunt, staff reporters Farah Stockman and Anne Bernard, retired Globe staff member Susan Trausch, foreign editor Jim Smith, and Pulitzer Prize winner Samantha Power, who – like Stockman – credited Neuffer with starting her on her journalism career.

Neuffer’s friends put together a memorial book called Remembering Elizabeth. It closes with this handwritten note:

“To Whomever Finds This:

“This is being written at the end of 1999 – and at the beginning of a new millennium. It is also the end of a century, what has been one of the bloodiest centuries ever seen – despite the incredible advancements mankind has made in science, the arts, and medicine. As a foreign correspondent for The Boston Globe – which hopefully still is a newspaper that publishes in New England! – I had some part in seeing some of this bloodshed while reporting on wars in the Gulf, Bosnia, and Rwanda. I would hope by the time you find this note, wars are extinct. But if they are not, please think again – and stop them. I’d like to think the next millennium will be one in which people are not killed – or prejudiced against – because of their race, ethnicity or religion. In fact, all of us in 1999 are counting on you to ensure the future is one of peace. Please make it so.” – Elizabeth Neuffer.

REMEMBER RFK

TO her remarks and in her spirit, let us also remember some words from Robert F Kennedy, whose assassination in 1968 was marked June 4th. “Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, they send forth a ripple of hope, and crossing each other, from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current, that can sweep down, the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” “Fear not the path of truth, for the lack of people walking on it.” Robert Francis Kennedy <http://RobertFKennedy.net>

SILBER STRIKES AGAIN

ANOTHER issue of interest in Boston involves Boston University's communications program. According to the alternative paper, The Weekly Dig, BU Chancellor John Silber, a Stalinesque figure on the right, abruptly fired dean, Brent Baker, a former Navy Admiral. Reports the Dig: “Professor John Schultz, The Ahmed Chalabi of Commonwealth Avenue, was installed as new Dean. Witnessing Silber's gangland tactics, the Russian-born father of one the program's graduates said ‘It reminds me of the Soviet Union.’”

Ironies abound here: Silber hired the dean who had been deemed a Gulf War 1 hero. He is now is opposing the teaching of basic journalism skills. A teacher at the school told me the Dig has it wrong and that Baker deserved to be axed eons ago. So, I might add, does Silber who seems to run BU as Chancellor for Life. I don't trust him at all, but some of his comments about the need for more liberal arts education in journalism schools may be right.

WHO IS PAUL BREMER

TOMDISPATCH.COM called my/our attention to a new piece in the Nation by Naomi Klein, who offers “a devastating account of “Iraq's one-man IMF,” Paul Bremer. She offers a vivid sense of what it means to defeat and then privatize a prostrate country. (And let's remember that every day Iraq simmers, American soldiers die.) Funny, but you would have thought that other media outlets would have dug into Bremer's past before he ended up running Iraq.

ON US TROOPS IN IRAQ

THE Guardian reports: “BBC news reporter John Simpson has hit out against the “trigger-happy” behavior of US troops in Iraq and claimed he saved an old Iraqi man from being shot by gung-ho marines. The veteran reporter, who spent time with American forces in Tikrit, praised British troops for their conduct during the war but said in an interview with Soldier Magazine that the Americans “lost control.”

“They lost all control screaming, shouting and kicking people,” Simpson said, adding that US soldiers' fear of snipers led to a ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ attitude. “One of the marines shouted ‘Snipers!’ and put up his gun, pointing it at a man on a rooftop. I could see it was an old boy putting out a blanket to air and I said to him in a quiet voice that I would be the witness at his trial for murder if he pulled the trigger. He stopped,” said the BBC reporter.”

UN inspectors were given two weeks to visit a former nuclear plant in Iraq to try to see how much uranium may have been looted. At the UN, Hans Blix reported the UN had not found the suspected WMDs and now a US General has spoken

out. Robert Scheer of the LA Times reported this week about a US commander who said “we were wrong

“Leave it to a Marine to be blunt. When Lt. Gen. James Conway, commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, was asked Friday why his Marines failed to encounter or uncover any of the weapons of mass destruction that U.S. intelligence had warned them about, his honesty put the White House to shame.

“We were simply wrong,” Conway said. “It was a surprise to me then, it remains a surprise to me now, that we have not uncovered [nuclear, chemical or biological] weapons” in Iraq. And, he added, “believe me, it’s not for lack of trying.”

Two days ago, news of a breakthrough in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks had the media buzzing. I saw little hard analysis about what the plan of action was agreed to. Not enough apparently. Hamas has now refused to sign on. The New York Times reports that Yasser Arafat is also unhappy. Reported James Bennet in The New York Times: “The Palestinian leader dismissed a promised Israeli concession, as skepticism on both sides and around the region vied with hopes for peace.”

LYING TIMES?

“CREDIBILITY Gap, Anyone?” asks Jim Lobe, of Inter Press Service : “WASHINGTON, Jun 2 (IPS) – When all three major U.S. newsweeklies Time, Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report

– run major features on the same day on possible government lying, you can bet you have the makings of a major scandal.

And when the two most important outlets of neo-conservative opinion – The Weekly Standard and The Wall Street Journal – come out on the same day with lead editorials spluttering outrage about suggestions of government lying, you can bet that things are going to get very hot as summer approaches in Washington.”

YOUR LETTERS: REVERSE THE FCC

JEFF CHESTER of the Center for Digital Democracy writes: “I just came from a meeting organized by Common Cause. A vote has been scheduled on 6/19 in Sen. Commerce. We think we can get 35% cap restored and also broadcast-newspaper. We need your help in having the message target the Senate that the FCC decision must be reversed. Can we get your allies in full swing? We need to show we can build on the momentum by pulling out all the stops. Our message is reverse the FCC.”

Eva Dolan writes from Saratoga Springs: “I have been reading your column. Thanks so much. I had the pleasure of hearing Ellen Goodman speak at the NAACP dinner in Saratoga Springs last year. That was pretty great too. Honest, informed news is such an eye opener and I am thankful for your voice.”

