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MEDIA PANDERING AS SCANDALS SWIRL

As a new week looms, old stories take center stage. The media is abuzz about Hillary Clinton's new book that goes on sale today. Even I seem to be hyping this as an event, when in fact it is just more soap opera and mutual exploitation – for media wags who can use the Bill and Monica soap opera to titillate us one more time about sex, power and humiliation, and so that Hill, as the headline writers refer to her, can engineer a big pay day. Thank you ABC and Barbara Walters for doing what you do best, squeezing out every bit of smarmy sensation out of a story we all thought had been milked beyond redemption. (Oh, Barbara is so great at it, isn't she, waiting until the last segment to keep her viewers hooked to pop the big one that she just "had to ask.")

Would you still say that there is a right-wing conspiracy, she is asked. Her response, and not a bad one, is that it is not such a conspiracy because it is so overt. Actually for the details on just how right-wing media set about to trash the Clinton Administration, see Sid Blumenthal's weighty tome. He names names, while the Senator from New York only nods and winks and talks about going down on her knees. (The last such abuse of prayer in the White House occurred when Henry Kissinger joined Richard Nixon on the floor in another unlikely but bizarre appeal to a higher deity.)

Historian Sean Wilentz gets it right in Salon.com in noting that the Clinton Wars that

Blumenthal condemns and Hillary complains about are actually being treated as history when they should be viewed as part of our ongoing political drama, since all the same forces are in play.

THE DEBATE CONTINUES

AFICIONADOS of that debate probably loved the exchange on Chris Matthew's Hard Ball between Lucianne Goldberg, the right-wing publicist who orchestrated Monica's "revelations," and David Brock, the one-time right-wing Clinton basher who exposed how dishonest his former colleagues were.

"You are watching **HARDBALL**.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

CHRIS MATTHEWS: Welcome back to **HARDBALL**. The big story tonight, Senator Hillary Clinton's media blitz. Her memoir, it's called, quote: "Living History," hits bookstores on Monday.

LUCIANNE GOLDBERG: Not for a second. She had to know. Your program isn't long enough to get into it. And by the way, hello, David. I've been looking for you since I found out you were the one that was ratting out the vast right-wing conspiracy to Sid Blumenthal.

DAVID BROCK: Here I am.

GOLDBERG: This is fascinating.

BROCK: Here I am.

GOLDBERG: Yes. And we didn't even know that.

BROCK: I was happy to do it.

GOLDBERG: What?

BROCK: I was happy to do it.

MATTHEWS: What are we talking about here? I'm off base here. What's the accusation you just made against your fellow colleague here?

GOLDBERG: He's not a colleague of mine. I'm not a colleague of his. David Brock, during the whole Monica thing, was getting information from people involved in it on the right, and as soon as he would talk to those people, because they all thought he was on the right himself. We didn't know that he was calling Sid Blumenthal in the White House and telling him every word of everything that he knew. Now, you cannot tell me that Sid Blumenthal kept that information.

MATTHEWS: Do you want to comment on that or not? I don't care, David.

BROCK: Yes. I mean, I broke with the right-wing before I ever spoke to Sidney Blumenthal, and it is correct that I did tell Sidney Blumenthal exactly what happened in terms of the political collusion, what was going on in the Jones case. And I am very proud to have done that."

These people sound like old left sectarians debating doctrinal points. The point is that the media machine that went after Clinton is still in place, and if anything, is stronger than ever.

WHERE THE WMDS ARE

IT does have a problem, though: how to explain away the mounting concerns that weapons of mass destruction have not been found yet in Iraq. Today's New York Times reports that captured Al Qaeda operatives say they had nothing to do with Saddam Hussein, another "rationale" for the war exposed as empty. Colin Powell was back on the Sunday talk shows upholding his original assertions and arguing that we are being exposed to

"revisionist history." Not a bad idea.

The Washington Post reported yesterday that "The House intelligence committee, expressing concern about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, asked Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet yesterday "to reevaluate U.S. intelligence" used by the Bush administration before the war to describe Iraq's proscribed weapons programs and its links to terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda."

The Associated Press adds: The Bush administration distorted intelligence and presented conjecture as evidence to justify a US invasion of Iraq, said a retired intelligence official who served during the months before the war.

"What disturbs me deeply is what I think are the disingenuous statements made from the very top about what the intelligence did say," said the official, Greg Thielmann, who retired in September. "The area of distortion was greatest in the nuclear field."

THE NATURE OF POLITICAL SCANDALS

APPARENTLY, many in the intelligence community say that they were not to blame, but that the intelligence product was politicized. The same conflict seems to be surfacing in England. TomDispatch.com writes about this:

"Let's try to understand the nature of how political scandals develop in Washington and how the elite media cover political news. You need, as a start, an aggrieved community inside the Beltway – and finally we have one, or two, or three. The intelligence 'community,' pushed and shoved by the neocons and radical nationalists in the Pentagon and the White House, sidelined, forced to support positions with which they felt uncomfortable, pres-

sured to come up with information supporting the administration's secret decision to invade Iraq, undoubtedly filled with personal (and political) pique, roused by a sense of injury, are now carrying their grievances to the press. I almost feel sorry for well-connected journalists. We're not talking leaks any more; we're talking torrents, we're talking cascades of unnamed, angry sources."

Take a look at the latest piece by dissident conservative Toronto Sun columnist Eric Margolis on the growing weapons of mass destruction scandal, where the key line is: "This column has been contacted by a number of retired intelligence officers, both individuals and groups, backing up assertions made here two weeks ago that a cabal of neo-conservatives in President George Bush's administration distorted or faked information that formed the basis of claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that imminently threatened the U.S. and all mankind." ("Retired" figures in such situations invariably represent active ones.)

BIO-WAR OR BALLOONS?

YESTERDAY'S Observer chipped away at another recent claim about those "trailers of mass destruction," writing: "Tony Blair faces a fresh crisis over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, as evidence emerges that two vehicles that he has repeatedly claimed to be Iraqi mobile biological warfare production units are nothing of the sort.

"The intelligence agency MI6, British defense officers and technical experts from the Porton Down microbiological research establishment have been ordered to conduct an urgent review of the mobile facilities, following US analysis which casts serious doubt on whether they really are germ labs.

"The British review comes amid widespread doubts expressed by scientists on both sides of

the Atlantic that the trucks could have been used to make biological weapons. Instead The Observer has established that it is increasingly likely that the units were designed to be used for hydrogen production to fill artillery balloons, part of a system originally sold to Saddam by Britain in 1987."

BUSH: WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT

TO respond to this, other information is being leaked to conservative outlets that the Administration has the "proof" but is waiting for the right time to release it. Debka reports: "According to the information reaching DEBKA-Net-Weekly's intelligence and military sources, the US government has gathered plenty of information from the now completed interrogations of Dr. Rihab Taha – "Dr. Germ" – Head of Iraq's bioweapons program, and Huda Salih Ammash – anthrax expert and member of the Baath ruling command council. Both cooperated fully with their American interrogators after they were handed over to US forces by Syria. Washington is therefore now in possession of a large amount of data on Saddam Hussein's forbidden weapons programs, including the places in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley and northern Syria where Iraq's banned production equipment and substances have been interred. However, the Bush administration has decided not to bow to public questioning of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The president is resolved to release this information at a time he deems advantageous."

WHAT NEXT AT THE NEW YORK TIMES?

IS there another shoe about to drop on The New York Times. Clearly there is more to this scandal

that has surfaced. I was thinking about the courage by the paper while watching the Discovery Times channel last night as it carried a Tom Brokaw paean to the Bush White House, a rerun of a documentary spending a day in the White House and showing us all how hard the big man works. This was more BJ journalism. Harpers's Publisher John R. MacArthur wrote Friday (not sure where) that "The New York Times sacrificed its top editor for the wrong reasons." In reality, this metaphoric beheading by the company's board of directors furthers a preposterous image of victimization that covers up far more serious transgressions by the "paper of record."

Notwithstanding Mr. Blair's "crime," such a histrionic mea culpa recalls the criminal who pleads to a lesser offence in order to escape prosecution for a more serious one. Whatever's driving the paper's nervous breakdown, I'm sure of this: The Times has lately been a perpetrator of fraud more than its victim." MacArthur goes on to criticize Iraq coverage and Judith Miller's reporting on chemical weapons.

As for Miller, Gabriel Demombynes writes in Online Journal: "In a story discussing experts' doubts about the Trailers of Mass Destruction, Miller lets the Bush administration respond via anonymous "intelligence officials." Why couldn't these people go on record? Why would Miller let them NOT go on record? If the administration wants to defend itself, let's hear who's speaking for them, so we know who to cut loose when the Great Purge gets going."

TIMES: "NOTORIOUSLY OPPOSED" REFORMS

WRITING in the Nation, Jim Carey reminds us that that while the Times was so forthcoming

about the Blair affair, it has "notoriously opposed many of the attempts at reform of mainstream journalism" and has been unresponsive to the concerns of readers, the hallmark of public journalism." (On this point, read Thomas Friedman's piece yesterday about how surprised he was to get 8,000 emails when he asked readers for his views on foreign policy. "Enough," he says, this week. He can't cope with the onslaught from people who want their voices heard.

Leave it to Michael Wolff of New York Magazine to speculate that the fall of the publisher of the Times may be next: "In The New York Times tradition – or mythology – The Times editor functions more or less as prime minister, and the Sulzberger family, The Times' controlling shareholders, as constitutional monarchs. Hence, with the government in crisis, Howell Raines, the executive editor and presumptive prime minister, tendered his resignation to his liege, Arthur Sulzberger Jr. Under this (unwritten) constitutional system, a new government will now be formed, and, therefore, the crisis will have passed.

IS ARTHUR NEXT TO GO?

"AND yet it is hard to have observed this crisis and not have seen Sulzberger as something more than titular. He has inserted himself at almost every opportunity into the mess. He's been signing memos along with Raines to the newsroom staff, in a departure from long tradition; it's his mug the paparazzi have been shooting; he's officiated at newsroom meetings; he's been issuing voluble statements to the media; he's empowered the multiple committees and investigations. Sulzberger's made it clear that he is in charge, and not reluctantly.

“In some sense, this may be reassuring – or at least it’s supposed to be. It’s one reason why monarchs exist: to be there when mortals fail. But it also gets harder and harder to avoid the conclusion that this is Arthur’s show, and has been for a long time, and that, with Raines and managing editor Gerald Boyd now sacrificed, he’s the remaining player in this drama.”

COPING WITH CRISES

IN other parts of the world, journalists are acting more courageously. BBC reports from Mozambique that “One of Mozambique’s leading journalists has become the first media professional in the country to announce publicly that he is HIV-positive. Bento Bango, who writes for the weekly paper Zambeze in Maputo, told a news conference on Thursday that he had decided to break the silence so that people would have no reason to speculate about his condition.”

In China, the SARS epidemic is challenging

journalists as the South China Morning Post reports: “It is no longer just liberal-minded newspapers that are reporting more aggressively on the mainland. In the aftermath of SARS, even journalists at Shanghai’s conservative Liberation Daily are complaining about a lack of transparency.

“It makes me angry how [SARS] was handled,” a reporter for the newspaper said, adding that if it was not for the western media, the true extent of the outbreak might never have been known. Now the question is just how far the new open-mindedness in the media will go? What is clear is that there is pressure for change.

“One journalism professor said the media “failed in its public duty” to provide timely information in the early stages of the outbreak, muzzled by government controls and self-censorship. Maybe after this, the media will think about its responsibility. I think the media will use this incident to report more aggressively on disasters,, said the professor.”

