

Big Media's Double Standards on Iran

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The mainstream U.S. press corps is again pounding the propaganda war drums, this time over dubious accusations of Iran's secret work on a nuclear bomb. It is a pattern of bias that Robert Parry calls the U.S. media's worst — and most dangerous — ethical violation.

Arguably, the most serious ethical crisis in U.S. journalism is the deep-seated bias about the Middle East that is displayed by major American news outlets, particularly the Washington Post and the New York Times.

When it comes to reporting on “designated enemies” in the Muslim world, the Post and the Times routinely jettison all sense of objectivity even when the stakes are as serious as war and peace, life and death. Propaganda wins out over balanced journalism.

We have seen this pattern with Iraq and its non-existent stockpiles of WMD; with the rush to judgment about Syria's supposed guilt in the killing of Lebanese leader Rafik Hariri; with the false certainty about Libya's role in the Lockerbie bombing; and many other examples of what everyone just “knows to be true” but often turns out isn't. [For more on these cases, [click here](#).]

The latest example of this ethical failing relates to reporting about Iran on such topics as [the buffoonish plot](#) to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington and [a new set of dubious allegations](#) about Iran's nuclear weapons program.

In these cases, U.S. mainstream news media happily marshals sources with histories of credibility problems; treats implausible scenarios with utmost respect; jettisons crucial context; and transforms the grays of ambiguity into black-and-white morality tales of good versus evil.

Then, behind these war drums of the U.S. press corps, the American people are marched toward confrontation and violence, while anyone who dares question the perceived wisdom of the Post, the Times and many other esteemed outlets is fair game for marginalization and ridicule.

An example of this propaganda passing as journalism has been the recent writings of Joby Warrick of the Washington Post about a vague but alarmist report produced by the new leadership of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

On Monday, the Post put on its front page a story about Russian scientist Vyacheslav Danilenko, a leading expert in the formation of nanodiamonds who spent several years

assisting Iranians develop a domestic industry in these micro-diamonds that have many commercial uses.

But Warrick's story is fraught with spooky shadows and scary music that suggest Danilenko is really part of an ongoing drive by Iranian authorities to overcome technological obstacles for a nuclear bomb. Just like in that spy thriller "Sum of All Fears," a greedy ex-Soviet nuclear scientist is helping to build a rogue nuclear bomb.

Warrick wrote: "When the Cold War abruptly ended in 1991, Vyacheslav Danilenko was a Soviet weapons scientist in need of a new line of work. At 57, he ... struggled to become a businessman, traveling through Europe and even to the United States to promote an idea for using explosives to create synthetic diamonds. Finally, he turned to Iran, a country that could fully appreciate the bombmaker's special mix of experience and talents."

Now, Warrick continued, Danilenko has been identified by Western diplomats as the unnamed scientist cited in the IAEA report as advising Iran on the explosive techniques to detonate a nuclear bomb. Warrick's story continues:

"No bomb was built, the diplomats say. But help from foreign scientists such as Danilenko enabled Iran to leapfrog over technical hurdles that otherwise could have taken years to overcome, according to former and current U.N. officials, Western diplomats and weapons experts."

Slanted Tale

However, Warrick crafts the story in a very misleading way, leaving out key facts that would create a less ominous picture. For instance, the article fails to mention that the U.S. intelligence community issued a National Intelligence Estimate in 2007 that Iran had stopped its work on a nuclear bomb in late 2003.

Danilenko, who has insisted that his work was limited to advising Iranians on the explosions used to manufacture nanodiamonds, last worked in Iran in 2002 and the explosive test that the IAEA associates with Danilenko - and which supposedly might have nuclear implications - was conducted in 2003.

In other words - even if one accepts that Danilenko is lying about his work in Iran - nothing in the Danilenko story undercuts the U.S. intelligence community's NIE. To leave out this crucial context in the Post's article suggests an intention to frighten rather than to inform.

Indeed, what is notable about the curious IAEA report is how much of it predates late 2003. [For a contrasting view of the Danilenko evidence, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Iran's Soviet Bomb-Maker Who Wasn't.](#)"]

Warrick also relies heavily on the expertise of discredited arms control analyst David Albright, the founder and president of the Institute for Science and International Security. Albright was a prominent voice in promoting President George W. Bush's pre-invasion case that Iraq possessed stockpiles of WMD.

Yet, from reading Warrick's article, you would have no idea of Albright's checkered history. You would simply assume that Albright is an unbiased expert who is bringing his analytical skills to bear to help us untangle difficult questions about Iran's nuclear research.

But Albright and his ISIS actually have a pattern of imbalanced work on nuclear proliferation and the spread of other dangerous weapons. For instance, ISIS has essentially ignored Israel's real nuclear arsenal - with only [a few brief items](#) over the past decade - while obsessing over a non-existent nuclear arsenal in Iran with [scores and scores of reports](#).

Albright has continued this disproportional emphasis despite the fact that Israel is arguably the world's most notorious rogue nuclear state. It has built up its undeclared nuclear arsenal after refusing to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and keeping IAEA inspectors away from its nuclear facilities.

By contrast, Iran signed the NPT, has renounced nuclear weapons, and has allowed IAEA inspectors to monitor its nuclear energy program. Granted, Iran's cooperation has been less than stellar but its record is far superior to Israel's. Yet, Albright and his ISIS have largely turned a blind eye to Israel's nukes and focused instead on Iran's theoretical bomb-making.

(On Sunday, when non-mainstream journalists confronted Albright about the disparity between ISIS's concentration on Iran and neglect of Israel, he angrily responded that he was currently working on a report about Israel. If so, it would be Albright's first substantive study solely on Israel's nuclear program since ISIS was founded in 1993, according to [an examination of its Web site](#).)

Conned on Iraq

Albright also has not been above harnessing his selective outrage over Middle East weapons in the cause of U.S. war propaganda.

At the end of summer 2002, as Bush was beginning his advertising roll-out for the Iraq invasion and dispatching his top aides to the Sunday talk shows to warn about "smoking guns" and "mushroom clouds," Albright co-authored a Sept. 10, 2002, article - entitled ["Is the Activity at Al Qaim Related to Nuclear Efforts?"](#) - which declared:

"High-resolution commercial satellite imagery shows an apparently operational facility at the site of Iraq's al Qaim phosphate plant and uranium extraction facility ... This site was where Iraq extracted uranium for its nuclear weapons program in the 1980s. ... This image raises questions about whether Iraq has rebuilt a uranium extraction facility at the site, possibly even underground. ... The uranium could be used in a clandestine nuclear weapons effort."

Albright's alarming allegations fit neatly with Bush's propaganda barrage, although as the months wore on - with Bush's warnings about aluminum tubes and yellowcake from Africa growing more outlandish - Albright did display more skepticism about the existence of a revived Iraqi nuclear program.

Still, he remained a "go-to" expert on other Iraqi purported WMD, such as chemical and biological weapons. In a typical quote on Oct. 5, 2002, Albright told CNN: "In terms of the chemical and biological weapons, Iraq has those now."

After Bush launched the Iraq invasion in March 2003 and Iraq's secret WMD caches didn't materialize, Albright admitted that he had been conned, explaining to the Los Angeles Times: "If there are no weapons of mass destruction, I'll be mad as hell."

"I certainly accepted the administration claims on chemical and biological weapons. I

figured they were telling the truth. If there is no [unconventional weapons program], I will feel taken, because they asserted these things with such assurance.” [See FAIR’s [“The Great WMD Hunt,”](#)]

Given the horrendous costs in blood and treasure resulting from the Iraq fiasco, an objective journalist might feel compelled to mention Albright’s track record of bias and errors. But the Post’s Warrick doesn’t.

A Troubling Trend

While Albright may stand out as a troubling example of how biased analysis works, he surely is not alone. Nor is Warrick’s selective journalism atypical of what regularly appears in the U.S. mainstream news media.

For instance, also on Monday, the New York Times published a lengthy article, entitled [“Israel Lobbies Discreetly for More Sanctions After U.N. Report on Iran,”](#) that discussed how Israeli leaders are working behind the scenes with threats and sabotage to stop Iran from advancing toward a nuclear bomb.

While a journalist perhaps doesn’t need to mention Israel’s nuclear arsenal each time allegations are lodged against Iran, it would seem quite appropriate for this article by Isabel Kershner from Jerusalem to take note of the hypocrisy of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior officials complaining about Iran’s hypothetical bomb when they have many real ones.

Yet Kershner’s article ignores the Israeli nuclear arsenal even as it raises concerns about how an Iranian bomb could touch off a regional nuclear arms race.

Netanyahu is quoted as saying: “The international community must stop Iran’s race to arm itself with nuclear weapons, a race that endangers the peace of the entire world.” The article then adds:

“While Israel regards nuclear-armed Iran as potentially an existential threat, it also threatens moderate Arab states and could set off a destabilizing regional arms race. ... The [IAEA] report did not speculate on the time it would take Iran to produce a nuclear weapon, but Israelis say it shows Iran is moving ever closer to the nuclear threshold while Western powers have been dragging their feet on action to stop it.”

Given these observations, one might think the New York Times would have inserted somewhere that Israel is itself a rogue nuclear state, possessing an undeclared nuclear arsenal that is regarded by experts as one of the world’s largest and most sophisticated.

Also, if Iran does move ahead toward building a nuclear bomb, one of the obvious factors would be that nuclear-armed Israel is constantly threatening to attack – and Iran suspects that Israel might be joined by the United States, the world’s preeminent nuclear and military power.

After witnessing the outcomes in Iraq and Libya – where leaders dismantled their nuclear programs – compared with North Korea, which pressed ahead to build a nuclear bomb, Iranian leaders might regard possession of a nuclear bomb as an existential necessity.

Forgoing a nuclear bomb didn’t save Iraq’s Saddam Hussein from dangling at the end of a

rope or Libya's Muammar Gaddafi from having a bullet shot into his brain. However, North Korea's Kim Jong-Il is still alive and holding power.

But the harsh necessities of geopolitics aside, journalistic ethics require presenting relevant details and nuances to the reader. To leave them out – especially to do so repeatedly with a predictable bias – is where the Post, the Times and much of the U.S. mainstream news media fall down.

For many years, one set of rules has applied to “designated enemies” in the Muslim world and another to Israel and various Arab “friends.” There is an unspoken bias or “group think” – and it is as undeniable as it is unacknowledged.

This hypocrisy has become so deeply engrained in the U.S. news media that the double standards are regarded as the natural order of things. Since Iran is perceived as unpopular in the United States and Israel is generally popular, Iran gets pummeled while Israel gets pampered.

But just because all the important U.S. media outlets violate the ethical rules of journalism on this front doesn't make the behavior good journalism. America's double standard on Middle East reporting is a fundamental violation of journalistic ethics – and it has contributed over the past decade to getting many innocent people killed.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq and Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth' are also available there.

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