

Mocking the Downing Street Memo

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American progressives think they have enough media clout to make a real issue of George W. Bush's possible impeachment over the Iraq War, they should read the account of Rep. John Conyers's rump hearing on the Downing Street Memo that appeared in the Washington Post.

The story by political correspondent Dana Milbank drips with a sarcasm that would never be allowed for a report on, say, a conservative gathering or on a topic involving any part of the American political spectrum other than the Left.

"In the Capitol basement yesterday, long-suffering House Democrats took a trip to the land of make-believe," Milbank wrote. "They pretended a small conference room was the Judiciary Committee hearing room, draping white linens over folding tables to make them look like witness tables and bringing in cardboard name tags and extra flags to make the whole thing look official."

And the insults — especially aimed at Rep. Conyers — just kept on coming. The Michigan Democrat "banged a large wooden gavel and got the other lawmakers to call him 'Mr. Chairman,'" the snide article said. [For the full flavor, see the Washington Post's "Democrats Play House To Rally Against the War," June 17, 2005]

Washington Post editors — having already dismissed the leaked British government documents about the Iraq War as boring, irrelevant news — are now turning to the tried-and-true tactic for silencing any remaining dissent, consigning those who won't go along to the political loony bin.

Those of us who have covered Washington for years have seen the pattern before. A group without sufficient inside-the-Beltway clout tries to draw attention to a scandal that the Post and other prestigious news arbiters have missed or gotten wrong. After ignoring the grievances for a while — and sensing that the complainers have no real muscle — the news arbiters start heaping on the abuse.

Contra-Cocaine

A previous example is the way the major newspapers reacted to Gary Webb's San Jose Mercury-News series in 1996, which alleged links between the CIA, the Nicaraguan contra rebels and cocaine traffickers in the 1980s.

At first, the big papers were silent about this upstart challenge to their long-standing dismissal of the contra-cocaine issue as a "conspiracy theory." But when the story spread on

the Internet and was taken up by the African-American community, the major newspapers lost their patience. They attacked the stories as nonsensical, called blacks “conspiracy prone,” and destroyed Webb’s career.

Rather than reexamining the contra-cocaine evidence seriously, the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times simply cast the issue outside the realm of rational discourse.

Even when the CIA’s inspector general issued reports in 1998 stating that the contra-cocaine connection actually was worse than had been known — and admitting that the CIA had protected some drug traffickers — the major media made only slight adjustments to the contemptuous tone that had long surrounded the issue.

Hounded out of journalism and running out of money, Webb committed suicide last December, an event that prompted hostile obituaries from the Los Angeles Times and other newspapers. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “America’s Debt to Journalist Gary Webb” or Robert Parry’s Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press and Project Truth.]

Right’s Reaction

The Right’s experience has been different. After Richard Nixon’s resignation over the Watergate scandal in 1974, conservatives recognized the political danger that came from the media’s power to set the parameters of permissible debate.

So, over the past three decades, the conservative movement has invested billions of dollars to build a protective wall around itself and its issues through the creation of its own media infrastructure. [For details, see Parry’s Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq.]

Now, the conservative media has the power to inflict as much — or more pain — on the mainstream media as the mainstream media can on conservatives. In other words, between the Mainstream and the Right in Washington, there is now a balance of fear.

Indeed, Dana Milbank, as the Post’s White House correspondent, has drawn conservative ire from time to time for not showing sufficient respect for George W. Bush. But if Milbank were tempted to write an over-the-top attack on Bush — like he did on Conyers and the Downing Street Memo hearing — he would pay a high price from retaliating conservatives who would accuse him of bias and flood his editors with complaints.

Almost certainly, Milbank would have second thoughts about such an article or his editors would for him. Without doubt, the story would not have appeared in the openly insulting form that it did when Democrats and liberals were the target.

Though no one wants to say it, everyone in mainstream journalism knows intuitively that there is no real risk in ripping liberals. Most often, it’s a win-win. Not only can you write almost whatever you want, but it buys the journalist a measure of protection from conservatives, who have a long record of costing reporters their jobs.

Milbank, for instance, must know that his putdown of the Downing Street Memo hearing means he can wave the article in front of Bush supporters the next time they criticize something he’s written about the president.

Dynamic

The reason for that part of the dynamic is largely that funders on the Left — unlike their counterparts on the Right — have chosen over the past three decades to divert money away from media into other priorities, such as “grassroots organizing” or direct-action projects, such as feeding the poor or buying up endangered wetlands.

Sometimes this refusal by wealthy liberals to “do media” seems so extreme that one has to wonder whether — except perhaps for some indigenous tribes in the jungles of Borneo — any group on the planet has less a grasp of the importance of information and media than American liberals do.

Even the Arabs — not usually known as information pioneers — have learned how investments in media, such as the satellite news channel al-Jazeera, can change the political dynamic of an entire region.

Though there have been a few positive developments in liberal media — particularly the growth of AM progressive talk radio at Air America and Democracy Radio — Left funders still show few signs of understanding how valuable media could be to a liberal political renaissance.

The latest trend in liberal grant-giving has been for “media reform,” such as trying to “save PBS” even as it adds more and more conservative programs. But the Left funders still shy away from the construction of media outlets and the creation of independent journalistic content.

Without that strong media, liberals can do little more than gnash their teeth when the Washington Post and other mainstream news outlets banish issues like the Iraq War deceptions beyond the bounds of Washington debate. [For more on the Post’s treatment of this issue, see Consortiumnews.com’s “LMSM ” the “Lying Mainstream Media.”]

Certainly, any thoughts about impeaching Bush are little more than pipedreams given the reality of today’s national media. In that sense, the Post’s attacks on the Downing Street Memo hearing should serve as a splash of cold water in the face of the American Left.

While Web sites and progressive talk radio have helped puncture the image of Bush’s invulnerability, a much broader media infrastructure would be needed if issues, such as the Iraq deceptions, are to be forced consistently into the national debate.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His new book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It’s also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth.’*

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