

Smell Something Rotten? 2010 P.U.-litzer Prizes recognize the worst of U.S. journalism

By [FAIR](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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At the end of every year FAIR rounds up some of the stinkiest examples of corporate media malfeasance. This year brought no shortage of contenders; indeed, the hardest part of the P.U.-litzers is narrowing down the list.

Readers who think we missed one can share their nominations at the FAIR Blog (fair.org/blog).

And without further ado....

-Prosecute the Messenger Award: Diane Sawyer (ABC News)

On October 22, **ABC World News** anchor Diane Sawyer introduced a report on **WikiLeaks'** exposure of thousands of classified documents from the Iraq War. **ABC** correspondent Martha Raddatz summarized the contents of the **WikiLeaks** files: "Deadly U.S. helicopter assaults on insurgents trying to surrender.... The Iraqi civilian death toll far higher than the U.S. has acknowledged.... Graphic detail about torture of detainees by the Iraqi military." After Raddatz's report, Sawyer offered this followup: "I know there's a lot of outrage about this again tonight, Martha. But tell me, anything more about prosecuting the **WikiLeaks** group?"

-New Excuses for Bombing Iran Award: David Broder (Washington Post)

In his [October 31 column](#), the **Washington Post's** David Broder offered one way for Barack Obama to demonstrate leadership after the midterms—a war with Iran. He wrote:

With strong Republican support in Congress for challenging Iran's ambition to become a nuclear power, he can spend much of 2011 and 2012 orchestrating a showdown with the mullahs. This will help him politically because the opposition party will be urging him on. And as tensions rise and we accelerate preparations for war, the economy will improve.

I am not suggesting, of course, that the president incite a war to get reelected. But the nation will rally around Obama because Iran is the greatest threat to the world in the young century. If he can confront this threat and contain Iran's nuclear ambitions, he will have made the world safer and may be regarded as one of the most successful presidents in history.

Broder is "not suggesting" inciting a war with Iran. He was merely saying it would bring the country together, fix the economy and make Obama one of the greatest presidents of all

time.

-The Quarter-Million-Dollar Middle Award: Kiran Chetry (CNN)

CNN anchor Kiran Chetry (**American Morning**, [2/1/10](#)) interviewing White House budget director Peter Orszag: “You also talk about letting taxes expire for families that make over \$250,000. Some would argue that in some parts of the country that is middle class.” Back in reality, more than 98 percent of U.S. households make less than \$250,000.

-Disappearing Palestinians Award: New York Times

On the **New York Times** op-ed page ([8/27/10](#)), Martin Indyk of the Brookings Institution gave one reason to be hopeful about peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority: “First, violence is down considerably in the region.” What he meant was that Israeli deaths were down. Completely unmentioned were the roughly 1,500 Palestinians that have been killed since the Israeli assault on Gaza in December 2008—the vast majority of whom were minors or noncombatant adults, according to the Israel human rights group B’Tselem. This oversight wasn’t just confined to the op-ed page: a Week in Review article by Ethan Bronner ([11/21/10](#)) reported “that the Palestinian/Israeli conflict has been largely drained of deadly violence in the past few years.” Hundreds of dead Palestinians are what is meant by “drained of violence.”

-Balancing Tolerance with Hate Award: Washington Post’s On Faith Blog

On National Coming Out Day ([10/11/10](#)), the **Washington Post’s On Faith** blog decided it would be a good time to hear from raging homophobe Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council. Perkins penned a column attacking “homosexual activist groups” under the headline “Christian Compassion Requires the Truth About Harms of Homosexuality.” Why on Earth does anyone need to hear Perkins’ claptrap? The **Post** explained on **Twitter** ([10/12/10](#)) that it was a matter of journalistic balance: “We’re working to cover both sides. Earlier, we hosted Dan Savage of It Gets Better in a live chat.” For the record, “It Gets Better” is Savage’s campaign to combat suicides among queer youth. Who knew that was a point of view that needed balancing?

-New Low in Wartime Propaganda Award: Time magazine

In the wake of a release of damning **WikiLeaks** documents about the state of the Afghan War, **Time** magazine’s [August 9](#) cover sought to turn the debate over the war around. The photo was of an Afghan woman’s maimed face, headlined “What Happens If We Leave Afghanistan.” The implication couldn’t be clearer: The Taliban will commit similar atrocities without the presence of U.S. forces. The fact that this particularly atrocity—whose connection to the Taliban has been [questioned](#)—happened with U.S. troops staying in Afghanistan complicates **Time’s** argument. **Time’s** Rick Stengel [defended](#) the cover story by explaining that “bad things do happen to people, and it is part of our job to confront and explain them.... I would rather confront readers with the Taliban’s treatment of women than ignore it. I would rather people know that reality as they make up their minds about what the U.S. and its allies should do in Afghanistan.” We’re still waiting for a **Time** cover that confronts readers with the bad things that happen to Afghans—including women and children—who are hit with U.S. bombs.

-Walk It Back Award: New York Times

On [November 29](#), the **New York Times** published an explosive piece based on the **WikiLeaks** diplomatic cables. “Iran Fortifies Its Missiles With the Aid of North Korea” was the headline, and the piece stated that Iran now possesses powerful missiles with “the capacity to strike at capitals in Western Europe.” The **Times** declined to publish the cable that made this case “at the request of the Obama administration,” but the cable was on the **WikiLeaks** website—and provided ample grounds to be skeptical about the **Times’** definitive conclusion. (It’s not clear, it turns out, that the kind of missile Iran supposedly bought from North Korea even exists.) After critiques were published by FAIR and others, the **Times** published a follow-up ([12/3/10](#)), “Wider Window Into Iran’s Missile Capabilities Offers a Murkier View.” The piece suggested that “a review of a dozen other State Department cables” and interviews “with American government officials offer a murkier picture of Iran’s missile capabilities.” But that “murky view” should have been obvious from the start. The **Times’** first account was taken as fact in countless media outlets; their quiet follow up wasn’t a correction, but it should have been.

-Nonexistent Union-Bashing Award: Rush Limbaugh

After 29 workers died at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, talkshow host Rush Limbaugh (4/9/10) fingered the culprit: the miners’ union. “Where was the union?” he asked. “The union is generally holding these companies up demanding all kinds of safety. Why were these miners continuing to work in what apparently was an unsafe atmosphere?” As it turned out, the mine, owned by notorious union-buster Massey Energy, didn’t have a union. Alerted to his inaccuracy, Limbaugh ([4/15/10](#)) doubled down, saying that 85 union coal miners won a decision against Massey and were re-hired. “So there were union workers there, and so the United Mine Workers should have been overseeing their safety.... You people, it’s been 21 years. At some point you are going to learn: If you go up against me on a challenge of fact, you are going to be wrong. It’s just that simple.” What’s even simpler? Disproving him: Those workers he’s talking about are from an entirely different mine owned by Massey—which has appealed the ruling, so even those workers aren’t back on the job yet (**AFL-CIO Blog**, [4/16/10](#)).

-Pay Cuts for Everyone (Except Me!) Award: Steven Pearlstein (Washington Post)

Under the headline “Wage Cuts Hurt, but They May Be the Only Way to Get Americans Back to Work” ([10/13/10](#)), **Washington Post** columnist Steven Pearlstein argued that “structural adjustments”—that is, lower pay—are necessary if the U.S. economy is to find a new equilibrium.” But he made clear that a 20 percent pay cut isn’t for everyone—it’s not for people like him, for example:

I’m sure many of you are reading this and thinking that if anyone is forced to take a pay cut to rebalance the economy, surely it ought to be overpaid investment bankers, corporate executives and newspaper columnists. That’s how things would work in a socialist paradise, but not in market economies, which are much better at producing efficiency than fairness.

While it’s hard to see investment bankers, whose industry survives because of a massive government bailout, as paragons of free-market efficiency, his inclusion of newspaper columnists is even less convincing: It’s clearly inefficient for the **Post** to pay Pearlstein when people would write columns of a similar caliber for a lot, lot less.

-Adventures in Overstatement Award: Juan Williams (Fox News Channel)

It's unsurprising that Juan Williams would have hard feelings about **NPR's** decision to fire him after comments he made on **Fox News Channel** about being nervous seeing people in airports wearing "Muslim garb." But it still took plenty of nerve for Williams to write this (**FoxNews.com**, [10/21/10](#)):

Daniel Schorr, my fellow **NPR** commentator who died earlier this year, used to talk about the initial shock of finding himself on President Nixon's enemies list. I can only imagine Dan's revulsion to realize that today **NPR** treats a journalist who has worked for them for 10 years with less regard, less respect for the value of independence of thought and embrace of real debate across political lines than Nixon ever displayed.

Had he been alive to respond, Schorr may have pointed out that in the most infamous case, Nixon had CIA agents trailing reporter Jack Anderson, plotting ways they might kill him.

-Obama Move to the Right Award: Matt Bai (New York Times)

In a crowded field of move-to-the-right pundits, Bai proved remarkably insistent that the White House's troubles could be fixed by furthering drifting to the right. On [December 1](#), Bai explained that since Obama "isn't willing to break publicly with liberals, independent and conservative voters tend to see him as a tool of the left." This analysis somehow overlooks the scrapping of the public option in the healthcare debate, the massive escalation of the Afghan War, and so on. And this would be the same White House whose [chief of staff](#) referred to progressives as "fucking retarded," whose [press secretary](#) denounced the "professional left" and whose [senior adviser](#) said that such critics are "insane." Not mention the fact that the [vice president](#) told the left to "stop whining" and the president [himself](#) urged them to "wake up." But, yes, when will they break publicly from the left?

-Fact Checking is Someone Else's Job Award: David Gregory (NBC)

ABC's This Week interim host Jake Tapper decided to let the factchecking website **PolitiFact** evaluate statements made on the program. When asked if he would consider a similar arrangement for Meet the Press, **NBC's** David Gregory declined (**Washington Post**, [4/12/10](#)):

An "interesting idea," Gregory allows, but not one the **NBC** show will be emulating. "People can factcheck Meet the Press every week on their own terms."

-Am-I-Reading-The-Onion Headline Writing Award: Washington Post

For its [April 26](#) story, "Amid Outrage Over Civilian Deaths in Pakistan, CIA Turns to Smaller Missiles."

Honorable mention goes to the **New York Times**, whose [November 11](#) story explained the U.S. plan to remain in Afghanistan for at least three years longer than advertised. The headline: "U.S. Plan Offers Path to Ending Afghan Combat."

-Immigration Misinformation Award: Bill O'Reilly (Fox News Channel)

During the debate over Arizona's harsh immigration law SB 1070, **Fox News'** Bill O'Reilly made a case in support of Arizona's crackdown: More immigrations equal more crime. According to O'Reilly, Phoenix's crime problem is "out of control" (5/3/10); in the state overall, the crime problem is "through the roof" (5/4/10, 5/13/10, 5/14/10), it is

“overwhelming” (5/6/10). One problem: There was no crime wave in Arizona or Phoenix, where authorities were reporting that crime was actually down—which research suggests is typical in areas with higher immigrant populations (FAIR Action Alert, [5/17/10](#)). After FAIR noted O’Reilly’s errors, he actually stopped making them. But he soon found new ways to justify his anti-immigrant stance, like arguing that crime is indeed down along the border—because immigrants have stopped coming into the country (**FAIR Blog**, [6/21/10](#)).

-Ask the Bosses Award: Fareed Zakaria (CNN)

Given the dismal state of the U.S. economy, the idea that Fareed Zakaria would present an October 30 primetime **CNN** special called Restoring the American Dream made perfect sense. But then Zakaria got around to explaining his guestlist: “Many complain we don’t hear enough from businessmen.” And that presumably was Zakaria’s rationale for a discussion of what’s best for U.S. workers restricted to four CEOs. Now **CNN**’s viewers know what the bosses are thinking about the state of the American dream; hopefully workers were taking notes.

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