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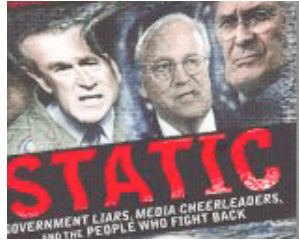
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## The War on Truth

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Written by Amy Goodman and David Goodman  
Wednesday, 20 September 2006



President George W. Bush has long preferred illusion to reality. "See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda," Bush explained of his approach at a public forum in 2005. For Bush, there are no real problems, only political problems. The only crises are when poll numbers fall.

Bush administration officials are obsessed with controlling the flow of information. Their strategy for maintaining their grip on power is simple: Perpetuate fear. We must remain in a state of total war. The implications for

democracy are chilling. President Bush has asserted a right to unlimited wartime powers. Thus the Constitution, Bill of Rights, Geneva Conventions, and the very notion of a balance of power have been shredded. The official rhetoric is that we are now in a Long War, led by the president, über alles.

The media, so cowed for so long, has failed to present a coherent picture of this frontal assault on our democracy. Alarming stories emerge, piecemeal, of warrantless wiretaps, of U.S. sanctioned torture, of offshore prisons where thousands are being held at the whim of a president who invokes sweeping life-and-death powers and dispatches propagandists to cover his trail.

Information is a crucial weapon in Bush's war. In a February 2006 speech Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that "information warfare" will be vital to fighting terrorism. He lashed out at the media for "an explosion of critical press stories" that exposed secret U.S. anti-terror programs, including propaganda efforts in Iraq. He declared: "We are fighting a battle where the survival of our free way of life is at stake and the center of gravity of that struggle is not simply on the battlefield overseas; it's a test of wills, and it will be won or lost with our publics, and with the publics of other nations. We'll need to do all we can to attract supporters to our efforts and to correct the lies that are being told, which so damage our country, and which are repeated and repeated and repeated."

He responded to the images of and charges about American torture of detainees in Guantánamo Bay and Iraq by dismissing them as fabrications. "The terrorists are trained . . . to lie. They're trained to allege that they've been tortured. They're trained to put out misinformation, and they're very good at it," he declared.

In a speech a month later, Rumsfeld made clear that he believes the real problem in Iraq is simply the coverage: "Much of the reporting in the U.S. and abroad has exaggerated the situation . . . Interestingly, all of the exaggerations seem to be on one side . . . The steady stream of errors all seem to be of a nature to inflame the situation and to give heart to the terrorists."

The "truth" that Rumsfeld prefers can be found in the articles that the Bush administration is planting in the "free" Iraqi media, written by American psychological warfare operatives.

IRAQI ARMY DEFEATS TERRORISM blared an October 2005 story in Iraqi newspapers that said, "The brave warriors of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are hard at work stopping al-Qaeda's attacks before they occur." Another planted article crowed, "The ISF has quickly developed into a viable fighting force capable of defending the people of Iraq against the cowards who launch their attacks on innocent people." The latter story was published in the Iraqi press around the time that the United States conceded that no Iraqi battalions were capable of fighting on their own.

The audience for this cartoonish propaganda is not just Iraqis: The Bush administration has turned psychological warfare, which by U.S. law can only be targeted at foreign audiences, on Americans. Rumsfeld dismissed the legal prohibitions against using foreign propaganda at home, declaring in February 2006: "The argument was, of course, that it was taking taxpayers' dollars . . . and propagandizing the American people. Of course, when you speak today, there's no one audience . . . Whatever it is we communicate inevitably is going to be heard by multiple audiences."

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Rumsfeld is leaving nothing to chance. A Pentagon briefing for Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the top US. commander in Iraq, identifies the "home audience" as one of the major targets of American propaganda. The Washington Post reported in April 2006 that U.S. psychological operations soldiers produced a video about atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein that was "seen on Fox News." The Bush administration also attempted to hype the role of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian who was killed in Iraq in June 2006. Bush officials used Zarqawi to falsely connect Saddam Hussein with the 9/11 attacks, and to bolster their dubious claim that the Iraqi insurgency was led by al Qaeda-backed foreign fighters. "Villainize Zarqawi/leverage xenophobia response," stated one US. military briefing. As part of this effort, U.S. psy-ops soldiers in 2004 leaked a supposed letter from Zarqawi to the New York Times that boasted of foreigners' role in suicide attacks in Iraq. Other reporters questioned the authenticity of the document that wound up in a widely cited front-page Times story. Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, the U.S. military's chief spokesman in Iraq in 2004, boasted later, "The Zarqawi PSYOP program is the most successful information campaign to date."

The "information war" Rumsfeld describes is deadly serious. ABC News reported in May 2006 that the government was tracking the phone numbers dialed from major news organizations in an attempt to root out whistle-blowers. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales added that it "is a possibility" that journalists will be prosecuted for publishing classified information. The message is clear: The media can either participate in Bush's war, or become a target of it. As Bush administration officials have warned, journalists who do not follow the party line are promoting terrorism.

Declaring war on the media is a desperate and risky move. But the corporate media, so compromised and atrophied by its own complicity in promoting the lies of the Bush administration, is woefully unprepared to do battle. If the past is any guide, as the government aims a sword at the heart of our civil liberties and freedoms, the media will provide sporadic resistance at best, and at worst, will help drive the sword home.

#### Covering for Power

When the Bush administration launched its PR blitz to sell the Iraq War in September 2002, the American public never stood a chance of learning the truth behind the massive fraud emanating from the White House. Bush and his propaganda czars knew something the American public had not quite grasped: The American media was little more than a megaphone for those in power. This was especially true for celebrity journalists like Judith Miller, the now-disgraced national security correspondent for the New York Times; and Bob Woodward, once a crusading muckraker at the Washington Post, now father confessor to the political elite.

For three years, the Bush administration called the tune, and the New York Times danced. In the run-up to the Iraq War, the newspaper, led by Miller's dispatches, acted as a conveyor belt for the lies of Iraqi exiles, channeling their self-serving distortions right onto the front pages. Miller's sources were the key players in the Iraqi National Congress, an outfit first created by the CIA and later funded by the Pentagon. Its leaders, such as Ahmad Chalabi, conjured fantastic tales about the menace posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. They hinted darkly about bioweapons labs buried beneath hospitals, aluminum tubes that the Iraqi dictator was intent on using to develop nuclear weapons, and secret meetings held between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

This was propaganda in the purest sense: disinformation that was bought and paid for by the U.S. government. The only thing needed was for respected news outlets to legitimize these fairy tales by running them as fact. The American media rose to the task, and carried out the Bush administration's dirty work with gusto. The consequences of the media's abdication of its role as watchdog of democracy are now written in new front page dispatches -- about the bloody quagmire in Iraq.

Yet the media can't seem to shake its instinct to defer to power. In December 2005, the New York Times published a shocking exposé by reporters James Risen and Eric Lichtblau. Their story revealed that following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration ordered the National Security Agency (NSA) to begin wiretapping people inside the United States, including U.S. citizens, in direct violation of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, which expressly forbids warrantless wiretaps inside the country. To read the article, you might have felt alarmed by the picture of creeping fascism that it describes. But you would have felt vaguely reassured that the press was on the job as a watchdog . . . until you came to the ninth paragraph:

The White House asked the New York Times not to publish this article, arguing that it could jeopardize continuing investigations and alert would-be terrorists that they might be under scrutiny. After meeting with senior administration officials to hear their concerns, the newspaper delayed publication for a year to conduct additional reporting. Some information that administration officials argued could be useful to terrorists has been omitted.

Let's do the math: Thirteen months before this story was published there was . . . a national election. Won by George W. Bush. The guy who ordered laws to be broken, because he felt he didn't have to answer to anyone. The last president to behave in this way was Richard Nixon. He faced a public outcry and was forced to resign in disgrace in the face of almost certain impeachment. Indeed, when the

wiretapping story was finally published in the Times, it sparked congressional investigations and even calls for impeachment of the president for violating the law.

It turns out the Times did, in fact, have this story ready to go before the 2004 election but decided to wait -- at the request of the people running for reelection, who rightly feared how the public might respond to the revelations.

Imagine, just for a moment, how different things might have been if this explosive exposé had been published when it was written.

The Times delayed publication because it might "jeopardize continuing investigations" -- ignoring, as the media watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) has pointed out, that "placing illegal and unconstitutional programs in jeopardy is the whole point of the First Amendment."

More astonishing was Times executive editor Bill Keller's explanation of why the story was delayed for so long. He said that the Bush administration had "assured senior editors of the Times that a variety of legal checks had been imposed that satisfied everyone involved that the program raised no legal questions." Mind you, this is the regime of George W. Bush we're talking about -- the folks who assured us that torture was legal, that preemptive war was legal, and that holding prisoners incommunicado in an offshore gulag was legal. But for the editor of the Times, it is enough just to take the government's word when it says something is legal. The Times finally published the story -- which won reporters Risen and Lichtblau a 2006 Pulitzer Prize -- only when it became apparent that Risen was planning to publish the revelation in a book a month later.

In spite of all that we now know about how the media failed to challenge government liars and instead became cheerleaders for a fraudulent war, the corporate media still covers for power. That may explain why an explosive report in the London Times on May 1, 2005, which caused a sensation around the world, was ignored or played down in the American media. The British paper revealed the contents of the so-called Downing Street memo, minutes of a July 2002 meeting between British prime minister Tony Blair and his top advisors, at which British intelligence chief Richard Dearlove reported to Blair on his meetings with CIA Director George Tenet. Dearlove explained that Bush "wanted to remove Saddam Hussein through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

This bombshell from a top British official -- that Bush had decided to attack Iraq and would simply cook the intelligence to suit his aims -- was greeted with a yawn by the American media. It was only after bloggers promoted the story that the corporate media acknowledged it -- and only then, to dismiss it. The Los Angeles Times insisted the memo was not a "smoking gun." The Washington Post dismissed it as old news. The New York Times barely mentioned it at all. And the network nightly news shows virtually ignored the story.

It's a sad day when the government no longer has to cover up its dishonesty because the American media does it for them.

#### The Access of Evil

This is the state of the corporate media today. It's a symptom of what we call the access of evil: journalists trading truth for access. The public unwittingly mistakes the illusion of news for reality. This also applies to the one-sided debates that are the rage on the networks and cable news. Viewers don't even know what they don't know. The media watch group Media Matters did a study of the Sunday morning talk shows. During Bush's first term as president, 69 percent of the journalists appearing on the Sunday shows were conservatives, and 58 percent of all guests were Republicans/conservatives. This echoes a study done by FAIR in the run-up to the Iraq War. In the two weeks surrounding Colin Powell's infamous 2003 speech to the UN in which he made the case for the invasion that was to occur six weeks later, 393 "experts" appeared on the major nightly network news shows. Of these, three -- less than 1 percent -- were leaders of antiwar organizations.

We can't even call this a "mainstream" media. It's an extreme media -- a media that cheerleads for war.

Instead of learning from the media what is actually going on in the world, we get static -- a veil of distortion, lies, omissions, and half-truths that obscure reality. As bodies pile up in Iraq and New Orleans, many people are mystified, wondering where it went so wrong.

We need a media that creates static of another kind: what the dictionary defines as "criticism, opposition, or unwanted interference." Instead of a media that covers for power, we need a media that covers the movements that create static -- and make history.

We are not waiting for this alternative media; people are building it right now. Blogs, Indymedia centers, independent filmmakers, and other grassroots media have opened a new way to understand what is happening in the world today.

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*Amy Goodman has been confronting the Washington establishment and its corporate sponsors while giving voice to the ordinary citizens and activists who are fighting for a better, more peaceful world. Her daily international radio and TV show, Democracy Now!, began in 1996 and is now carried on about 500 stations and on [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org). It is the largest media collaboration in North American public broadcasting. Democracy Now! is more than a show -- it's a movement.*

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