



The Press as the War Machine's Ally

Ted Galen Carpenter

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American journalists typically have portrayed themselves as the public's "watchdogs" monitoring the behavior of elected and appointed government officials. In the foreign policy arena, the mainstream news media have failed spectacularly at their self-proclaimed mission. Indeed, such journalists have rarely even made a credible effort to perform that task. Too often, they instead have become either useful idiots for promoting an interventionist U.S. policy or even willing propagandists for government officials who push Washington's aggressive role in world affairs.

A flagrant preference for US foreign policy activism (even outright militarism) has characterized the vast majority of press accounts over the decades. The public's normal skepticism about the motives of officials and the truthfulness of their statements tends to evaporate whenever those leaders contend that the latest adverse development overseas portends a dire threat to the security and liberty of the American people. The most recent versions of that tactic have been to hype the threat of non-state terrorism and the "existential threat" that Russia and China supposedly pose to America's security and liberty. Too many members of the establishment press actively assist such efforts at threat inflation. Notably, much of the news media served as an enthusiastic conduit for allegations about Saddam Hussein's fictional weapons of mass destruction or Russia's nonexistent "bounties" on US troops in Afghanistan.

Political leaders and their media allies also shamelessly exploit national pride to generate support for an aggressive US approach to world affairs. The dominant narrative since World War II, fostered by the mainstream media, is that America has both a strategic and moral imperative to be the "global leader." That perspective exists alongside a "can do" spirit, which assumes that the United States will be able to prevail over difficult international challenges even when "lesser" nations would fail – or even had already failed. Washington's two-decade-long persistence in Afghanistan, despite the fiascos that the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and previous empires had experienced there is the latest example

American journalists have exhibited nationalistic hubris in abundance about America's supposedly unique capabilities in world affairs. Explicitly or implicitly, many of them subscribe

to Madeleine Albright's infamous jingoistic assertion that the United States is the "indispensable nation" and that "we stand tall and see further" than other societies.

There also is unmistakable tendency by members of the media to oversimplify complex, murky foreign conflicts and convey that version to the American people. On far too many occasions, media outlets have created and promoted artificial melodramas about such conflicts. One faction (nearly always the one favored by the US government) is deemed virtuous and the victim of some terrible outrage on the part of an opposing faction or factions. The news media portray those disfavored factions, in turn, not merely as malign impediments to Washington's policy goals and the best interests of the population in the particular country, but as the embodiment of absolute evil. Such a campaign of demonization leads to distorted coverage in multiple ways. Friendly journalists minimize or overlook entirely instances of unsavory behavior on the part of the "virtuous" faction while highlighting, sometimes to the point of caricature, actions of the designated villains. Such binary portrayals were especially flagrant in news stories about the Balkan wars in the 1990s and more recently in stories about Syria's civil war, but they have plagued coverage of other foreign crises as well.

Too many journalists also have overlooked highly questionable aspects of US policy in terms of prudence or morality. At times, they even ignored or excused atrocities and outright war crimes that Washington's allies (such as Saudi Arabia) or clients (such as the Kosovo Liberation Army) committed. Worse, some members of the journalistic community have acted as apologists for atrocities and war crimes that the US government itself has committed. Independent investigative journalist and author James Bovard concluded from his decades-long experience, that "most of what passes for journalism is shilling for Leviathan." He added that it is "impossible to overstate the servility of reporters proud to serve as 'stenographers with amnesia.'" To some extent, that defect applies to the coverage of all policy areas, but it exhibits special pervasiveness and virulence with regard to foreign policy and national security issues.

There is a pronounced media bias in favor of not only a hyper-activist US foreign policy, but a highly militarized one. Bovard notes caustically that "Obama, like [George W.] Bush, received unlimited 'benefits of the doubt' whenever he bombed foreign nations." Indeed, that dispensation even applied (albeit to a more limited extent) to Donald Trump's behavior. One of the rare times Trump received favorable words from his enemies in the liberal-dominated media was when he launched a missile attack against Syria in response to the Assad government's alleged use of chemical weapons.

That episode highlighted the media's enthusiasm for an aggressive, even bloodthirsty, US approach. *Daily Beast* columnist Matt Lewis nearly gushed with enthusiasm following that coercive action. "This seemed like a very different Donald Trump. More serious – and clearly moved emotionally." Fareed Zakaria, the host of CNN's program "Global Public Square," concluded that "President Trump recognized that the President of the United States does have to act to enforce international norms, does have to have this broader moral and political purpose. . . I think there has been an interesting morphing and education of Donald Trump." Indeed, Trump "became President of the United States last night."

The award for nearly psychotic militarism overcoming an establishment journalist's normal loathing for Trump, though, had to go to MSNBC host (and former anchor of the Nightly News on the main NBC network) Brian Williams in response to the missile strikes on Syria. "We see these beautiful pictures at night from the decks of these two US Navy vessels in the eastern Mediterranean. . . . I am tempted to quote the great Leonard Cohen: 'I am guided by the beauty of our weapons.'" Trump also received at least measured praise in the mainstream media when he authorized a drone attack that killed the head of Iran's Quds force in 2020.

For the news media to play even a reasonably decent role as a watchdog regarding Washington's conduct in the international arena, a marked growth in both independence and skepticism is essential. At the time of the Persian Gulf War, syndicated columnist Colman McCarthy lamented "a media nationalism that joined press and state." Unfortunately, the trend appears to be toward an even more symbiotic relationship between the news media and members of the political and policy elites who are firmly committed to perpetuating Washington's current, overbearing role in world affairs. The probable result will be a new round of ill-advised, unnecessary wars.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on defense, foreign policy, and civil liberties issues. His latest book, Unreliable Watchdog: The News Media and U.S. Foreign Policy, is forthcoming in June 2022.