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The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published weekly (except for the second week in January, and biweekly the third week of July through the second week of September) by The Nation Company, L.P. © 2004 in the U.S.A. by The Nation Company, L.P., 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003. (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, DC 20002. (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. International Telex: 667 155 NATION. Subscription orders, changes of address and all subscription inquiries: The Nation, PO Box 55149, Boulder, CO 80322-5149, or call 1-800-333-8536. Publications Mail Agreement No: 40041477. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Circulation Dept. or DPGM, 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor, ON N9A 6J3. When ordering a subscription, please allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of your first issue and for all subscription transactions. Back issues \$4 prepaid (\$6 foreign) from: The Nation, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003. The Nation is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Member, Audit Bureau of Circulations. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Nation, PO Box 55149, Boulder, CO 80322-5149. This issue went to press on February 25. Printed in U.S.A. on recycled paper.

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Floating With the Tide



The conduct of our major newspapers in the run-up to the Iraq war calls to mind William Hazlitt's famous appraisal of the *Times* of London. "It floats with the tide," Hazlitt wrote in 1823. "It sails with the stream."

Two new studies—one by Michael Massing in the February 26 *New York Review of Books*, which surveys news articles; the other by Chris Mooney in the March/April *Columbia Journalism Review*, which examines unsigned editorials—document the extent to which our elite press sailed with the stream in the decisive months leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Together, these articles paint a disconcerting portrait of a timid, credulous press corps that, when confronted by an Administration intent on war, sank to new depths of obsequiousness and docility.

Embedded in Massing's prosecutorial brief against the press are the following charges: the dissemination of White House misinformation on Iraq; the embrace of dubious Iraqi defectors and exiles as sources; a lack of curiosity about debates in the intelligence community concerning US allegations about Iraq's WMD capabilities; and a cavalier disregard for the International Atomic Energy Agency. Much of Massing's firepower is directed at the *New York Times* in general and one reporter—Judith Miller—in particular. It was Miller (with Michael Gordon) who produced, on September 8, 2002, an article titled "US Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts," which reported that Iraq had tried to import thousands of high-strength aluminum tubes with the purpose of producing enriched uranium and, eventually, an atomic weapon. Bush Administration "hard-liners," according to Miller and Gordon, feared nothing less than "a mushroom cloud." The same day the article appeared, Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice parroted the charges about the tubes on the Sunday-morning chat shows. "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," Rice intoned on CNN.

"In the following months," Massing writes, "the tubes would become a key prop in the administration's case for war, and the *Times* played a critical part in legitimizing it." A crucial element of the legitimization process was the *Times*'s disregard for experts who didn't share the White House's dark view of Saddam's WMD capabilities. The only national news organization that emerges unscathed from Massing's inquiry is the low-profile Washington bureau of the Knight Ridder newspaper chain—which includes the *Miami Herald*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *San Jose Mercury News*—whose hard-hitting stories were based on the doubts and fears of military, intelligence and diplomatic officials, many of whom believed that the White House was misinterpreting and fabricating evidence about Iraq's bellicosity.

Miller has been the subject of much scrutiny [see Russ Baker, "Scoops and Truth at the *Times*," June 23, 2003], but Massing has produced the most authoritative account of her deferential posture vis-à-vis the Bush Administration. Massing asked Miller why her stories did not generally include the views of skeptical WMD experts; her reply is jaw-dropping: "My job isn't to assess the government's information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself," Miller averred. "My job is to tell readers of the *New York*

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Times what the government thought of Iraq's arsenal." Massing adds, with appropriate gravity: "Many journalists would disagree with this; instead they would consider offering an independent evaluation of official claims one of their chief responsibilities."

Miller, it turns out, has no monopoly on docility. *CJR*'s survey of editorials makes it distressingly apparent that our top newspapers did not abstain from the chance to inform their readers about "what the government thought" of Iraq's supposed arsenal. Mooney examined more than eighty editorials in half a dozen papers—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*—for a six-week period, starting with Colin Powell's February 5 speech to the United Nations and concluding with the onset of hostilities on March 19. It's worth noting that Mooney, a freelance writer in Washington, had no ideological ax to grind. In the months leading up to the war, he was a "liberal hawk" who expressed prowar sentiments on his blog. To a certain extent, his piece is a reckoning with himself. (Full disclosure: I was a *CJR* staff member from 2001–03 and remain on the magazine's masthead in an advisory capacity.)

The *CJR* report is largely about the reaction to Powell's speech, which was rapturously received by editorialists. "Irrefutable," proclaimed the *Washington Post*. Powell "may not have produced a 'smoking gun,'" ventured the *New York Times*, but the speech left "little question that Mr. Hussein had tried hard to conceal one." International newspapers—including the British *Guardian*—treated the speech as one side of an ongoing UN debate about Iraq's WMD capacities and gave ample coverage to the opposing views of Hans Blix and the IAEA's Mohammed ElBaradei, who maintained that Iraq did not have them. "Without appearing to weigh such contrary evidence," Mooney writes, "the US papers all essentially pronounced Powell right, though they couldn't possibly know for sure that he was. In short, they *trusted* him. And in so doing, they failed to bring even an elementary skepticism to the Bush case for war."

Mooney was struck by the "strongly nationalistic character" of the editorials under review and the "almost knee-jerk tendency to distrust international perspectives"—a sentiment that, in many cases, led editorialists to minimize and dismiss the findings of Blix and ElBaradei. In March 2003, the latter informed the UN that there was little evidence of an active Iraqi nuclear program, but the prowar newspapers in the *CJR* study simply "shrugged off" ElBaradei's critique. At least one of them—the *Wall Street Journal*—heaped scorn on the inspectors. When Saddam Hussein insisted that he did not possess WMDs, the *Journal* sneered, "If you believe that, you are probably a Swedish weapons inspector."

What do the editorial page editors say in their own defense? "We don't discuss the process that goes into writing the editorials," the *New York Times*'s Gail Collins told *CJR*. "I will go off my normal rule to say I wish we'd known there were no weapons of mass destruction." Said Janet Clayton of the *Los Angeles Times*: "I do wish we'd been more skeptical of Powell's WMD claims before the UN." Others remain faithful to their own discredited narratives. "I'm not going to second-guess what we wrote," said the *Chicago Tribune*'s Bruce Dold. "If indeed [Saddam] did not

have weapons—and I think it's all still an open question—the fact was that he didn't comply, and the UN had looked the other way while hundreds of thousands of people had died in Iraq."

In the months after the war ended, major US newspapers—especially the *Washington Post*—recovered their skepticism and began to challenge aggressively the Administration's justifications for war. But it was too little, too late: When we needed them most, they weren't there. *CJR* gave the last word to the intelligence writer Thomas Powers. "All these papers are on notice," Powers said. "They've seen what happened. They were hustled."

SCOTT SHERMAN

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Was Strom a Rapist?

Months after Strom Thurmond's African-American daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, stepped into history, commentators continue to step around the most explosive aspect of this controversy with the same stealth that ushered Thurmond into interracial fatherhood at 22. Thurmond, icon of the Bible-toting, family-values-promoting right, not only contradicted his segregationist credo by impregnating young Carrie Butler in 1925, he most likely violated the law against statutory rape. Yet the very real possibility that Butler was a victim of an illegal sexual assault has been virtually ignored by a media eager to commend Thurmond's families for playing nice. The celebration of their gentility and patience implies that it would be indecorous to raise the question of whether this all-American story began in sexual abuse.

Any serious inquiry into the likelihood that Butler was the victim of statutory rape was precluded by the *Washington Post*'s inaccurate report that the age of consent in South Carolina was 14 in 1925, which was widely repeated in print and electronic media. In fact, a South Carolina statute enacted in 1922 criminalized the carnal knowledge of any woman under 16. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine whether Thurmond violated that law without Butler's birth date, for which there are no records. But we do know that when she delivered her child on October 12, 1925, she was at most 16—according to Washington-Williams, Butler was born in 1909 or 1910. The only way the conclusion of statutory rape could be avoided is if Butler was born no later than early January 1909, and conception occurred just after her sixteenth birthday. Of course, the odds are against this meticulous alignment.

No doubt apologists will remind us that the possibility of statutory rape does not alone suggest that Butler did not consent to the act. But in a climate characterized by fear and abject racial intimidation, the question of whether Carrie Butler, an impoverished maid in the Thurmond family household, freely consented is virtually meaningless. The more telling question is whether there was any way she could freely say no. Even as a teenager, Butler had to understand that her chances of protecting her sexual autonomy against the desires of the determined son of Edgefield's most prominent family were virtually nonexistent. The protection law promised was empty; after all, statutory

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