

Why is the New York Times silent on massive Iraq death toll?

A question for Bill Keller

16 October 2006

The following leaflet is being distributed outside a lecture being given by New York Times Executive Editor Bill Keller at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on Monday, October 16.

The corporate-controlled American media is deliberately suppressing the results of a survey that demonstrates that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq has caused more than 600,000 deaths in the past three years—a figure that in and of itself refutes all the claims by the Bush administration that it carried out the invasion of Iraq in order to foster democracy in the Middle East. What kind of “freedom” and “human rights” can be the consequence of such a slaughter?

The major American media organizations—including the *New York Times*—published only brief reports on the study October 11. Taking their cue from President Bush, who declared the survey’s methodology faulty without offering any proof, the *Times* and other leading media outlets have dropped the subject. There have been no editorials in the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, or other major newspapers, nor any demands for a more serious response from the Bush administration.

There is no legitimate, scientific basis for rejecting the findings of this survey carried out under the auspices of Johns Hopkins, one of the leading US universities. Under the direction of epidemiologists at the college’s Bloomberg School of Public Health, Iraqi interviewers visited thousands of Iraqi families throughout the war-torn country. The sample size was huge: 12,801 individuals in 1,849 households, in a country of 26 million people. By comparison, the CBS-*New York Times* poll, whose findings receive regular front-page coverage in the *Times*, uses a sample of 800 to 2,000 people in a country of 300 million.

If President Bush were to declare at his next press

conference that the opinion polls showing 60 percent or more of the population opposed to the war in Iraq are bogus, and based on a “flawed methodology,” the *Times* would presumably denounce such an accusation and demand the White House provide proof of the alleged poll-rigging.

Why is a similar standard not applied to the Johns Hopkins inquiry into the excess deaths in Iraq? Is it, perhaps, because these figures would implicate all those responsible for the US military intervention—including its media apologists—in killing on a scale that deserves to be called genocide?

During the week since the Johns Hopkins survey was published, the *Times* has found ample space to report on the affairs of the multimillionaire Astor family, the charges against a local high school teacher of having sex with a student, and countless other news items of even lesser weight. Yet it has had no room to follow up the findings of a study, carried out with a standard scientific method—a “cluster survey”—and published in the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet*.

As a number of public health professionals have explained in letters and blogs to leading newspapers like the *Times* itself and the *Guardian* in Great Britain, the most important data provided by the Hopkins survey is the enormous difference between the death rate reported by the surveyed families before and after the US invasion.

In the 18 months before the invasion, the more than 12,000 individuals reported 82 deaths, two of them by violence. In the 39 months since the invasion, this group saw 547 deaths, 300 of them by violence. The death rate in this surveyed group jumped from 0.7 percent to 2.5 percent, a rise of nearly 300 percent.

Such an increase is utterly incompatible with the

official Bush administration estimate of 30,000 civilian deaths—as of December 2005—or the estimates of 50,000 to 60,000 deaths from groups like Iraq Body Count, which have no on-the-ground reporting capability and rely on media accounts.

There is every reason to believe that the *Times* and other US media outlets are refusing to further report and investigate the Johns Hopkins study because its findings demonstrate that both the Bush administration and the American media itself have been carrying out a cover-up of the bloodbath in Iraq.

One has only to contrast the silence on the Hopkins study with two equivalent cases: the Kosovo War of 1999 and the Darfur conflict of the past three years.

In Kosovo, the media readily echoed the Clinton administration claims that tens, even hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians had been massacred by the Serbian military and paramilitary forces. In fact, the death toll, horrendous as it was, came to several thousands, with crimes committed on both sides of the conflict between the Serb forces and the CIA-backed Kosovo Liberation Army. But the US media blared out numbers that suggested death on a Holocaust-like scale in order to swing public opinion behind the NATO war against Serbia.

More recently, the *Times* has been one of the publications most adamant about the necessity for UN or NATO intervention in Darfur, in the western Sudan. Using statistical methods no different from those employed by the Johns Hopkins study in Iraq, humanitarian aid organizations have produced credible estimates that some 200,000 people may have died of starvation and ethnic killings by militias backed by the central government in Sudan.

The US government and the American media generally have labeled the killings in Darfur as genocide. According to the Hopkins study, the Iraq war has taken three times as many lives as the bloodbath in Sudan, a country whose population is roughly equal to Iraq's. The Bush administration is thus implicated in a crime which approaches those of the Nazis. Indeed, if Americans were dying at the rate that Iraqis have died over the past three years, the death toll would be 7.5 million.

There are many other reasons to examine with a critical eye the pretensions of the *New York Times* to represent a genuine “Fourth Estate.” This newspaper is

deeply implicated in the drive to condition the American people to accept the war in Iraq. It played the leading role, through the activities of reporters like Judith Miller, in peddling and validating Bush administration lies about weapons of mass destruction, Al Qaeda ties to Iraq, and the supposed Iraqi threat to the United States.

Only two months ago, the *Times* public editor Byron Calame revealed that the newspaper deliberately withheld its report on the Bush administration's program of illegal domestic spying until after the 2004 election. This decision was taken by executive editor Bill Keller, and its effect was to help insure Bush's reelection.

Mr. Keller will appear in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on Monday, October 16, to give the Sixteenth Annual University of Michigan Senate Lecture On Academic And Intellectual Freedom. He has chosen as his topic, “Editors in Chains: Secrets, Security and the Press.”

After the *Times* editor gives his account of his moral sweatings over whether or not to make public a criminal conspiracy by the Bush administration against the democratic rights of the American people, he should be asked why his newspaper is choosing to cover up a serious and meticulously documented report on the worst human rights violation of the twenty-first century: the US war in Iraq.

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