

**The
BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 160 – November 24, 2005

*Breaches of Trust
Stooges of Power and Distortion
by John Maxwell*

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly Version



Copyright © 2002 - 2005
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved

This article originally appeared in the Jamaica Observer.

As I understand them, the rules are pretty simple. Freedom of the Press is the public's right to truthful information so that people can make up their own minds on matters which may concern their survival, their happiness and their ordinary existence.

Corporations cannot have human rights because they are not human beings. Freedom of Expression, of which Freedom of the Press is just one part, is the essential baseline of democratic organization. If people do not know the truth, if it is distorted, skewed or hidden from them, they are likely to endanger themselves and others because they do not have the information on which they may act rationally.

It is now clear from the opinion polls that in the matter of the Iraq war, most Americans are now aware that they have been misled, lied to and deceived by their leaders as well as by the Press whose duty it is to keep politicians honest and the stream of public information pure and unsullied.

The Press, which is one expression of this Freedom of Expression, has the duty and responsibility to tell the truth as completely and as accurately as it can. The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth is a rubric not just for the courthouse but for any purveyor of public information.

The people have the right to know where their news originates, just as they have the right to know where their drinking water originates. In both cases, the people have the right to know that what they are consuming has not been tampered with or adulterated in any way.

So I have been bemused first by the case of Judith Miller and now by the case of Bob Woodward. Both claim to be journalists, and until now, both seemed to be. But now both have been exposed as stooges of power, accomplices of people who distort the truth and feed lies to the public to satisfy their own lusts and ambitions.

The Black Commentator – Breaches of Trust: Stooges of Power and Distortion

The recent disclosure by Bob Woodward that he has been, for two years, helping to defend an official program of lying and disinformation has destroyed for me, whatever credibility Woodward may have had as a chronicler of important events. He is an accomplice in the falsification of history.

Some commentators in the US appear to believe that Woodward's announcement means an "ease-up" for Mr. "Scooter" Libby, because Woodward has said that Libby was not the first official to leak the name of Valerie Plame to a journalist. But that is not what Mr. Libby is charged with. He is under indictment for lying to a grand jury and to an FBI investigation and for obstruction of justice. Nothing that Mr. Woodward has said or can say will change that. In fact, Mr. Woodward's testimony may make life more stressful for Mr. Libby, since it is probably now possible to reconstruct the lines of an official conspiracy to mislead the American public and the world.

Two questions occur to me in this regard. First: to whom could Mr. Woodward have been talking who could have referred, "almost as gossip," about Mrs. Wilson? The second is: why would Mrs. Wilson's name have come up in this conversation, apparently, out of the blue?

Mr. Woodward has bought himself a lot more time in front of the grand jury and may end up being indicted himself.

Reasonable Doubt

In July 2003, shortly after Ambassador Wilson's op ed in the *New York Times* exposed the Niger Uranium Hoax, the Italian journalist, Elisabetta Burba told the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* that she gave documents on Iraq seeking uranium from Niger to the US embassy in Rome to try to find out if the information was credible.

"The story seemed fake to me," she said, and she published nothing on it. "I realized that this could be a worldwide scoop, but...if it turned out to be a hoax and I published it I would have ended my career."

Miss Burba had gone to the trouble of going to Niger herself to check the story before turning the papers over to the US Embassy in Rome. Presumably she told the Embassy what she had done. She heard nothing from the Embassy.

One would have imagined that the Embassy would have made its own inquiries before sending suspect documents up the line. It would have been as easy or easier for the Embassy to send a fact checker to Niger as it had been for Miss Burba to go. For some reason, however, they appeared to have simply transmitted the documents to Washington.

Miss Burba says that if the documents were true she would have had a world scoop but that if they were not and she published them it would have meant the end of her career.

If an Italian journalist could have had such reservations, would we not expect that seasoned diplomats and intelligence professionals would have had their own doubts and would have tried to resolve them. They could simply have phoned the French Embassy in Rome or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Geneva. They did not apparently do any of these things. The hoax had wheels and was moving fast.

In July 2003 when the hoax fell apart, the *Sunday Telegraph* [UK] phoned the French Ambassador to Niger and the *Independent* [UK] phoned the Niger Minister of Mines – who both dismissed the story out of hand. France controls the mining of uranium in Niger and the IAEA controls the disposition of uranium. Didn't the US embassy know that?

The Black Commentator – Breaches of Trust: Stooges of Power and Distortion

Miss Burba, according to the Associated press, told *Corriere della Sera* that the documents appeared to show that Iraq wanted to buy uranium from Niger. She became suspicious because the documents talked about huge amounts of uranium yet were short on details. She then went to Niger.

On her return, she said she told her editor "the story seemed fake to me." After further discussions, Burba brought the documents to the U.S. Embassy. "I went by myself and gave them the dossier. No one said anything more to me," Burba was quoted as saying.

An extract from the top secret National Intelligence Estimate which was used in composing Mr. Bush's State of the Union speech was released by the White House in July 2003. According to that extract, the State Department told the CIA that "The claims of Iraqi pursuit of natural uranium in Africa are, in INR's [the department's in-house intelligence arm] assessment, highly dubious," reprinted in a 90-page report prepared by the CIA in October. The State Department said Saddam Hussein "continues to want nuclear weapons" and is making "at least a limited effort to maintain and acquire nuclear weapon-related capabilities." Those activities "do not, however, add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing an...integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons."

One imagines that such a report must have been prepared for the White house, certainly for the National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, who then occupied that position. According to her, when the yellow cake hit the fan, nobody in her neck of the woods was conscious of any doubt about the claim.

However bizarre that explanation sounds, it does make one wonder why then did Mr. Bush transfer his source attribution to the British, when his own intelligence agencies had told him four months before, in October, to remove the reference to uranium from a speech he was due to make in Cincinnati.

According to a letter written to the Chairman of the Permanent Joint House Committee on Intelligence, (then congressman, now CIA chief) Porter Goss, Congressman Henry Waxman said that the White House needed to explain the many discrepancies in how the uranium claim came to be used in the president's State of the Union speech. This was particularly because Mr. Tenet had fought so hard for the removal of a similar reference in the Cincinnati speech and was now being blamed for its inclusion four months later in the State of the Union speech.

Mr. Waxman also wanted to understand Ms Rice's claim on "Face the Nation" in July 2003, that "Had there been even a peep that the agency did not want that sentence in or that George Tenet did not want that sentence in, that the Director of Central Intelligence did not want it in, it would have gone."

Can anyone believe that Ms. Rice, her deputy, Stephen Hadley and whoever was the speechwriter, were not aware of the brouhaha about the Cincinnati speech? That they did not know of the State department's reservations?

It is clear to me either that the conspiracy is much bigger than anyone seems to think or that the entire Bush White house spends lots of time asleep at the wheel. Whichever is true, it seems to me that there should be some extremely important changes coming soon in the makeup of the Bush Administration.

As Mr. Waxman put it two years ago, the credibility of the United States is at stake. It has since been shredded by all the disclosure about torture, outsourcing torture, secret prisons, terror weapons and other flagrant breaches of the human rights of Americans, Iraqis, Muslims in general and all sorts of other people, not to mention the Haitian people moldering away in their island concentration camp.

There was always the lingering belief that when all else failed, the American Press would rise up and do its duty. Bob Woodward has for 30 years been a worldwide icon for the integrity and doggedness of the Press in

The Black Commentator – Breaches of Trust: Stooges of Power and Distortion

the pursuit of the truth. Today, the reputation of the Administration is in tatters and the probity of the Press is seen to be a comforting myth.

There are just two developments to be optimistic about. The Congress and the American public both appear to be awakening after a long slumber, induced by the opiate of the Big Lie. It is not only Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro and their people who feel menaced by a superpower apparently out of control. The rest of the world is just as uncomfortable. But even if balance, peace and rationality are restored, most of us outside the United States will not be comforted by the knowledge that it is so easy for a small group of dedicated and unscrupulous men to capture the wheelhouse of the world's only remaining superpower and steer it to destabilize, fragment and eventually obliterate any chance of a peaceful world order, all wondering if we will wake up to smoking guns in the form of mushroom clouds.

Almost exactly four years ago, in November 2001, then Attorney General John Ashcroft proclaimed, "To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is that your tactics aid terrorists."

He was not talking about the government of the USA but about the Taliban.

Rightwing commentator William Safire said in that same week, "The sudden seizure of power by the executive branch, bypassing all constitutional checks and balances, is beginning to be recognized by cooler heads in the White House, Defense Department and C.I.A. as more than a bit excessive" and Safire believed that the American constitution, the American legal system, American journalism and other democratic institutions would, with the spirit of the American people, soon put things to rights.

He was wrong.

John Maxwell of the University of the West Indies (UWI) is the veteran Jamaican journalist who in 1999 single-handedly thwarted the Jamaican government's efforts to build houses at Hope, the nation's oldest and best known botanical gardens. His campaigning earned him first prize in the 2000 Sandals Resort's annual Environmental Journalism Competition, the region's richest journalism prize. He is also the author of How to Make Our Own News: A Primer for Environmentalists and Journalists (Jamaica, 2000). Mr. Maxwell can be reached at jonmax@mac.com.

Copyright©John Maxwell