

GRAND TOUR

Bully Pulpit

By Bruce W. Cook



THE ABUSE OF THE MEDIA HAS reached a new low point with the recent *Newsweek* magazine retraction of its story on Muslim prisoner mistreatment. A reliable source “within the Pentagon” told *Newsweek* that pages ripped from the Koran had been flushed down a toilet by American interrogators, allegedly as part of systematic psychological torment of Arab prisoners detained for terrorist activities.

Rioting in Afghanistan ensued, anti-Americanism was inflamed, and some sixteen people were killed as a result of the aftermath of violence. The White House demanded an investigation of the *Newsweek* story, and a subsequent retraction followed.

A retraction is virtually unheard of in the national press. Although in recent months, the Dan Rather/CBS News scandal as well as shake-ups in editorial departments at both local and national media, including the venerable *New York Times*, have cast attention on journalistic standards. For *Newsweek* to buckle is clear evidence of the failure of the supposed fine line of journalistic checks and balances prior to print. Worse, it is evidence of extreme bias, even malfeasance. Right-wing conspiracy theorists will have a field day. The editor of *Newsweek* made a rare personal appearance on network television news to explain. When questioned by national news anchors on the influence of White House demands, he answered, “It had no bearing on our decision to retract.” The tooth fairy will no doubt put an extra dollar under his pillow for that response.

That, however, is not the only crucial issue. In fact, there are three important parts to this story. First, the issue of media bias. Whatever happened to fair and accurate reporting? Did it ever exist, or is it simply a mirage, a false belief that the American press, print and electronic, was once more balanced? Today, instead of adhering to standards of journalistic fair-play across the sea of communication, we have competitive sources appealing to factions left and right. And do not forget that said factions do so not necessarily for the greater public good, but essentially to line their pockets with ad dollars from businesses who concur with the bias. Make no mistake, news is a revenue-generating business. As a result, Americans and citizens worldwide no longer trust the news. And wisely so. We all must evaluate what we are told. Often, we do not have the tools for proper evaluation, and in this era of communication and information, we are at a loss.

The second element of concern in this story is simply the question of what salient facts in a story of world impact were not irrefutably checked. There is no excuse for such misuse of

the press. Comments such as, “we had trusted this source before” and “we had no reason to doubt this source” are not acceptable. Granted, fact-checking a clandestine source over a story that cannot be verified on many levels is a challenge, and ultimately a call left to editors whether to run said story.

In this particular case, was the call to print the story justifiable given the ongoing war, the clear danger to life and property, both American and foreign, that reaction from such a story could and did bring? Or again, is it a rush to bring attention to a particular bias, and ultimately to sell more magazines to a blood-thirsty public that does not have the tools to evaluate?

The final element of this debacle, which needs consideration, is perhaps the most controversial, and the most damning of all. It has been suggested that the entire story has been flipped, and what actually happened is one of the prisoners tore pages from the Koran and stuffed them down the toilet in order to cause a plumbing overflow. In fairness, critics have charged that this counter claim is preposterous, made-up as “damage control” to sugar-coat the guilty. We will never know the truth.

If the situation was reversed, if pages of the Old or New Testament of the Bible were ripped from their binding and stuffed down a toilet in front of Jewish or Christian prisoners of war in Muslim captivity as an act of disrespect and defiance, or so-called psychological warfare, would riots and murder break out in the streets? Perhaps in other times. Today? Not likely.

More to the point, and subject to even greater controversy, ask yourself if American captors are executing, beheading, kidnapping, torturing and dumping prisoners in mass graves. Are Americans rioting in the streets over this abuse? America and our allies may not be knights on white horses, free of guilt, absent of acts unworthy of our national spirit. And, there is no excuse for the disrespect and demonization of a religion and a culture that is different from the American mainstream. Clearly, in this war an act such as the alleged flushing of the pages of the Koran can clearly lead to bloodshed. The lack of judgement in the media is in-part to blame for this bloodshed. A call by editors to kill the story because there was no way to confirm the veracity of the facts, might have been the more prudent choice. This act may prolong this war, and more people will die. We must do better. In the field of media a lack of judgement is also no excuse. Fair and balanced reporting is the cornerstone of democracy anywhere in the world. **GT**

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