

How the US Press Lost Its Way

Exclusive: People often wonder what happened to the American press after it distinguished itself in the 1970s by exposing the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. How did the U.S. news media lose its way over the past four decades, a question addressed by Robert Parry at a conference on information and secrecy.

By Robert Parry

Editor's Note: From May 10 to May 12, journalist Robert Parry participated in a conference entitled, "From the Pentagon Papers to WikiLeaks: A Transatlantic Conversation on the Public's Right to Know," sponsored by the Heidelberg Center for American Studies in Heidelberg, Germany.

The conference consisted of media figures, legal scholars and freedom-of-information advocates and included Neil Sheehan, the New York Times correspondent who got the Pentagon Papers from Daniel Ellsberg, and Barry Sussman, the Washington Post editor who oversaw the newspaper's coverage of the Watergate scandal.

Parry spoke on the last day and offered the following observations:

Much of this conference has focused on the glory days of American journalism in the 1970s. And rightly so. My talk, however, will deal with the more depressing question of why things then went so terribly wrong.

First, let me say it's been an honor to be at this conference, especially with Neil Sheehan and Barry Sussman, who played such important roles exposing serious crimes of state in the early to mid-1970s. That was a time when U.S. journalism perhaps was at its best, far from perfect, but doing what the Founders had in mind when they afforded special protections to the American press.

In the 1970s, besides the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, there were other important press disclosures, like the My Lai massacre story and the CIA abuses – from Iran to Guatemala, from Cuba to Chile. For people around the world, American journalism was the gold standard.

Granted, that was never the full picture. There were shortcomings even in the 1970s. You also could argue that the U.S. news media's performance then was exceptional mostly in contrast to its failures during the Cold War, when reporters tended to be stenographers to power, going along to get along, including early in the Vietnam War.

Even the much-admired Walter Cronkite flacked for the early U.S. bombing raids

over Vietnam. But the press of the Seventies seemed to have learned lessons from its earlier gullibility. And, with Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974, it could be said that America's checks and balances were alive and well. In newsrooms around Washington, there was reason to be proud.

More broadly, the United States had reason to be proud. The American constitutional Republic had shown its capacity for self-correction. Not only had brave individuals done their jobs as professionals both in media and in government but the nation's institutions had worked.

The press, the Congress, the courts along with an informed public had demanded and gotten accountability and reform. Not only were Nixon and many of his henchmen gone but Congress enacted legal changes designed to prevent the excessive influence of political donors, to open up government secrets to public scrutiny, to protect whistleblowers.

Again, things weren't perfect and the nation faced many challenges in the 1970s, but one could say that democracy had been strengthened. As painful as the process was, the system had worked.

However, the success of democracy, this victory of the rule of law, was fragile. The struggle between dishonest pols and honest reporters between an engaged people and behind-the-scenes powerbrokers was far from over. Indeed, a new battle was just beginning.

After Nixon's resignation, his embittered allies didn't simply run up the white flag. They got to work ensuring that they would never experience "another Watergate." And it wasn't just a struggle that pitted the press against the pols.

You could say that much of the U.S. Establishment had been unnerved by the surge of democracy that had arisen to challenge longstanding traditions and injustices – the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the environmental movement, the anti-war movement. There also were cultural upheavals, with the hippies and the drug culture. It was an unsettling time for the rich white men who held most of the levers of power.

And these folks were not about to cede power easily. They made adjustments, yes; they gave some ground. But many were determined to fight back and some had experience in defusing and dismantling social movements around the world. Indeed, the CIA's decades of political and media manipulation in the Third World and even Europe gave Nixon's allies a playbook for how to neutralize opponents and steer a population here at home.

So, they set out to do just that. America, which had often targeted other

countries for manipulation, was about to get a taste of the same medicine. It may seem odd to explain what has happened over the past three-plus decades as the result of a well-orchestrated intelligence operation. But step back for a moment and take the name United States out of the equation. Think of it as "Nation X" or as, say, Chile in the 1970s.

Think how the CIA would target a country with the goal of shoring up a wealthy oligarchy. The Agency might begin by taking over influential media outlets or starting its own. It would identify useful friends and isolate troublesome enemies.

It would organize pro-oligarchy political groups. It would finance agit-prop specialists skilled at undermining and discrediting perceived enemies. If the project were successful, you would expect the oligarchy to consolidate its power, to get laws written in its favor. And eventually the winners would take a larger share of the nation's wealth.

And what we saw in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States was something like the behavior of an embattled oligarchy. Nixon's embittered allies and the Right behaved as if they were following a CIA script. They built fronts; they took over and opened new media outlets; they spread propaganda; they discredited people who got in the way; ultimately, they consolidated power; they changed laws in their favor; and over the course of several decades they made themselves even richer, indeed a lot richer, and that, in turn, has translated into even more power.

Getting Things Started

One key early figure in this operation was Nixon's Treasury Secretary Bill Simon, a Wall Street investment banker who also ran the Olin Foundation. Simon used that perch to begin lining up right-wing foundations and getting them to pool their money. The likes of Richard Mellon Scaife and the Koch Brothers began investing in right-wing media, in right-wing think tanks, and in right-wing attack groups. Some of these attack groups were set up to go after troublesome reporters.

Ironically, given our comparison of this effort to CIA covert operations interfering in foreign countries, this time money flowed in from foreign sources to help fund propaganda inside the United States. The Rev. Sun Myung Moon, a South Korean cult leader who fancies himself the Messiah, invested tens of millions of dollars of his mysterious money in right-wing political and media organizations, including the Washington Times. Australian Rupert Murdoch showed up with millions more to buy up news media properties and give them a right-wing bent.

American neocons also emerged in this time frame. They became the intellectual shock troops for the Right's counteroffensive. They also focused much of their attention on the media. In the late 1970s, for instance, neocon Marty Peretz took over the formerly liberal New Republic and turned it into the incubator that gave us right-wing columnists like Charles Krauthammer and Fred Barnes.

Arriving in DC

I had arrived in Washington in 1977, as a correspondent for the Associated Press. So I saw the end of that brief golden era of journalism. Jimmy Carter was president at the time. His administration was itself a reaction to the lies of the Vietnam War and Watergate. One of Carter's campaign promises was never to lie to the American people. I recall AP's White House correspondent, Michael Putzel, taking it on as a personal challenge to catch Carter in at least one lie. It sounds almost quaint today.

Then, came Ronald Reagan. He was the perfect pitchman for this pushback, the ideal front man for rallying average Americans to betray their own interests. A former movie star, Reagan could sell you anything, even Chesterfield cigarettes. He also could sell nostalgia for a mythical better day, a time before all those jarring social changes of the 1960s and all those national humiliations of the 1970s.

After defeating Jimmy Carter in 1980, Reagan brought with him a gifted team of P.R. and ad men. And, partly through the connection of Reagan's Vice President (and former CIA director) George H.W. Bush, Reagan's team also hooked up with CIA professionals, experts in the dark arts of political and media manipulation. The CIA's Old Boys had suffered their own pain in the 1970s. Many got fired and their proud agency became the butt of national jokes.

Reagan also put one of Richard Nixon's most cynical and unscrupulous allies, Bill Casey, in charge of CIA. Casey was a former intelligence officer from the OSS in World War II. He obsessed over the importance of deception and propaganda, what he viewed as key elements in defeating the Nazis and later containing the Communists. Casey understood that he who controlled the flow of information had a decisive advantage in any conflict.

Coordinated Assault

So, what we saw in the early to mid-1980s was an assault on the two key sources of information in Official Washington. One was inside the CIA itself, the analytical division. These fiercely independent CIA analysts had been a thorn in the side of the war machine for some time.

As Neil Sheehan (who wrote the Pentagon Papers stories for the New York Times)

recalled in his keynote speech to the conference, it was a CIA analyst, Sam Adams, who had leaked evidence that the Vietnam War was unwinnable.

In the early 1980s, other CIA analysts were seeing signs that the Soviet Union was in rapid decline. But that was not the answer the Reagan administration wanted, since its policy centered around scaring the American people about the Soviet menace and financing a massive U.S. military buildup to counter Moscow's supposed bid for worldwide conquest.

Reagan also wanted to assist right-wing dictatorships in Central America as they put down uprisings by peasants, students, even priests and nuns. Fear of an ever-expanding Soviet Union was to be the key motivator to separate the American people from their money and their common sense. They had to believe that a dangerous bear was on the loose and on the prowl in Central America.

In other words, the CIA analysts had to be brought into line. Rather than talk about the Soviet Union in decline and eager for accommodation with the West, the analysts had to get cracking, exaggerating the Soviet threat. And Casey had just the guy to do it, an ambitious, well-regarded young bureaucrat named Robert Gates.

Casey put Gates in charge of the analytical division and soon his reorganization of the directorate had sent some key analysts out to pasture and brought in a new more flexible cadre of careerists. They agreed that the Soviets were indeed 10 feet tall, the source of all evil in the world, and plotting to attack the U.S. through the soft underbelly of Texas.

The Troublesome Press Corps

But the problem wasn't just getting control of the information inside the U.S. government. It also was to get control of the unruly Washington press corps. Casey had a hand in this, too. He moved one of his most experienced disinformation specialists, Walter Raymond Jr., from the CIA to the National Security Council.

The reason for Raymond's shift was that the CIA was legally barred from influencing U.S. policy and politics. But the thinking was that if you externalized Raymond to the NSC then he wasn't technically in the CIA. Casey used a similar subterfuge when he ran the contra war in Nicaragua through NSC official Oliver North – after Congress had banned the CIA and the Pentagon from giving the contras military support.

At the NSC, Raymond was put in charge of a special interagency task force for coordinating what was called "public diplomacy," or how to sell U.S. policies around the world. But the office had a more secret and more sensitive domestic

function. It was targeting members of Congress and the U.S. press corps and through them, the American people.

Secret government documents that later emerged in the Iran-Contra scandal revealed that Raymond's team worked aggressively and systematically to lobby news executives and turn them against their reporters when the reporters dug up information that clashed with Reagan's propaganda, especially in hot spots like Central America. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

Sometimes the techniques were crude. For instance, a favorite tactic to discredit women reporters in Central America was to start whispering campaigns about them sleeping with Sandinistas. Other troublesome journalists were simply labeled "liberal," a curse word in that period.

You might want to believe that the news executives stood up for their reporters. But that usually was not what happened.

The smear techniques proved remarkably successful, in part, because many of the news executives were already inclined to support Reagan's muscular foreign policy and his resistance to the popular movements that had rocked America in the 1960s and 1970s, opening doors to minorities and women and lessening bigotry against gays.

Many senior editors shared a Cold War point-of-view and were unnerved by those political and cultural changes. At the AP, where I was, general manager Keith Fuller made no secret of his admiration for Reagan in having rescued America from the supposedly shameful days of the 1960s and 1970s. In one speech, Fuller talked about those days ripping at the "sinews" of American authority and saying that Americans wanted to get back to "the union of Adam and Eve," not "the union of Adam and Bruce."

Perception Management

Privately, the Reagan team had a name for what they were up to in their domestic propaganda schemes. They called it "perception management." The idea was that if you could manage how the American people perceived events abroad, you could not only insure their continued support of the foreign policy, but in making the people more compliant domestically. A frightened population is much easier to control.

Thus, if you could manage the information flows inside the government and inside the Washington press corps, you could be more confident that there would be no more Vietnam-style protests. No more Pentagon Papers. No more My Lai massacre disclosures. No more Watergates.

Sure, there would be the occasional reporter who would fight a story through to publication but he or she could be neutralized. And most significantly, in the face of this well-organized pressure, the nation's two preeminent papers where the likes of Neil Sheehan and Barry Sussman had starred the New York Times and the Washington Post largely moved to the sidelines when it came to Reagan-era scandals.

In the 1980s, the two influential papers became more solicitous to the Establishment than they were committed to the quality journalism that had contributed to the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s.

Investigating Reagan

All this became a factor in my journalism career. In late 1980, I had been put on the AP special assignment team and had begun investigating the secret side of the Reagan administration's policies in Central America. My work wasn't much appreciated by Keith Fuller and the AP brass, but I pressed on and broke a number of important stories about the CIA's operations.

We won some journalism awards and that gave me a little protection. But it was always touch and go. When one of Reagan's public diplomacy guys realized that I wasn't going to back down, he looked me in the eye and said, in all seriousness, "we will controversialize you."

That notion of controversializing reporters may sound silly, but it was a real strategy. By the mid-1980s, America's Right had built up an imposing media infrastructure of its own with many newspapers and magazines.

The Right also controlled specialized attack groups that targeted journalists by name and were dedicated to making individual reporters the issue. Anti-journalism activists, the likes of Reed Irvine and Brent Bozell, coordinated their attacks with Reagan's allies and operatives.

Still at AP we persisted in the Central America investigations. Essentially, I was trying to follow the advice of Watergate's Deep Throat – to "follow the money." Specifically, I wanted to know how the Nicaraguan contra rebels were getting funded after Congress cut off their financial support.

That work led me to the secret operations of Oliver North and to the first story in June 1985 about his role funneling off-the-books money to the contras. Later, with my AP colleague Brian Barger, we discovered that many of the contra units had gotten involved in cocaine smuggling to help pay the bills.

On the Sidelines

Yet, as we pressed our investigation, we found ourselves remarkably alone, with the occasional exception of some left-of-center magazine or the Miami Herald. The AP editors took note that the Washington Post and the New York Times were staying mostly on the sidelines.

And, by summer 1986, Congress had buckled under Reagan's pressure and agreed to resume contra funding. Barger quit the AP around that time and I was somewhat in the doghouse for having led the wire service off on this wild goose chase. However, then fate conspired to get the truth out.

On Oct. 5, 1986, on one of the last flights of Oliver North's secret air force to dump weapons to the contras inside Nicaragua, a teen-age Sandinista draftee fired a SAM missile that brought down the cargo plane. One of the Americans onboard, Eugene Hasenfus, parachuted to safety and was captured. Suddenly our crazy AP stories didn't seem so crazy after all.

The crashed plane and later disclosures about Reagan's arms-for-hostage deals with Iran (from a Beirut newspaper) led to congressional investigations. And this brief vindication led me to a new job offer from Newsweek, which I took in early 1987.

In a way, the Iran-Contra Affair marked an opportunity to not only bring important facts to the American people but to revive that independent spirit of the U.S. press. And there were a few months of good reporting as the Big Papers scrambled to catch up.

Losing Momentum

But the dynamic had shifted too much. Or, you might say, the CIA-style political/media operation had advanced too far. There were too many forces supporting containment of the scandal and too few committed to its full explication.

In that sense, Iran-Contra became a test of the new paradigm: an aggressive right-wing apparatus doing damage control, determined to prevent another Watergate, up against a weakened force favoring accountability and truth.

At Newsweek which was part of the Washington Post company at the time there simply wasn't the stomach for another Watergate anyway. Some senior editors even considered it a sign of their patriotism not to take part in the destruction of another Republican presidency.

So, there was little pushback when President Reagan and Vice President George Bush were largely spared and a few lower-ranking officials, like Oliver North, were thrown under the bus.

However, it wasn't fine with me. From my sources, it was clear that a cover-up was underway to protect Reagan and his heir apparent Bush. And, I pushed through some stories at Newsweek along those lines. But the top brass, particularly executive editor Maynard Parker, had different ideas. He didn't like Iran-Contra as a story and wanted it wrapped up quickly.

At one famous point in the hearings, the well-liked Secretary of State George Shultz declared that in Washington, "trust is the coin of the realm." After that, he proceeded to lie through his teeth (a reality he later admitted to Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh).

But in 1987, Shultz's assurance was good enough for my Newsweek editors who essentially told me that any further reporting about a cover-up was unwelcome. Newsweek bureau chief Evan Thomas specifically ordered me not to even read the congressional Iran-Contra report when it came out in fall 1987. I was reassigned to work on the Gary Hart sex scandal.

I hung on at Newsweek until 1990 and kept an eye on the Iran-Contra scandal as some of the secrets continued to dribble out. But my situation was untenable and I agreed to leave in June 1990. What was clear to me at that point was that the concept of "perception management" had carried the day in Washington, with remarkably little resistance from the Washington press corps.

Reverting to Form

While still living on the reputation of those golden days of the 1970s, Washington journalists had reverted to their pre-Vietnam, pre-Watergate inability to penetrate important government secrets in a significant way.

Yes, the press corps could get fierce about Bill Clinton's sex life or Al Gore's supposed exaggerations. But when it came to national security secrets especially with a Republican in the White House the American people and the world were in much greater danger than they knew.

For me, I did some documentaries for PBS Frontline and kept digging up material that shed new light on the dark secrets of the 1980s. But no one seemed interested. So, at the advice of my oldest son Sam, I turned to what was then the new media frontier, the Internet, and started what was the first investigative news Web site.

The site is called Consortiumnews.com, and over the past 16-plus years we have published hundreds of investigative news articles, including many from historical records that are now available but are of little interest to the major U.S. news outlets. Interestingly, a number of former CIA analysts also submit articles to us.

Yet, despite the Internet's promise for circumventing the obstacles that I faced at AP and Newsweek, the Internet also has many shortcomings, including a shortage of good editing, too little fact-checking, too many crazy conspiracy theories, and perhaps most important of all, too little money.

The readership also is fragmented, making it impossible to have the impact that the New York Times had in the Pentagon Papers or the Washington Post had during Watergate.

Sadly, too, my fears about the dangers from a Washington press corps that had stopped asking the tough questions on issues of war and peace also proved prescient. After George W. Bush seized the White House – and especially after the 9/11 attacks – many journalists reverted back their earlier roles as stenographers to power. They also became cheerleaders for a misguided war in Iraq.

Indeed, you can track the arc of modern American journalism from its apex at the Pentagon Papers and Watergate curving downward to that center point of Iran-Contra before reaching the nadir of Bush's war in Iraq.

Journalists found it hard even to challenge Bush when he was telling obvious lies. For instance, in June 2003, as the search for WMD came up empty, Bush began to tell reporters that he had no choice but to invade because Saddam Hussein had refused to let UN inspectors in.

Though everyone knew that Hussein had let the inspectors in and that it was Bush who had forced them to leave in March 2003, not a single reporter confronted Bush on this lie, which he repeated again and again right through his exit interviews in 2008.

The WikiLeaks Era

The failures of the U.S. news media over Iraq set the stage for what one might call the era of WikiLeaks. The absence of accountability and transparency over the last decade gave impetus to another evolution in how news can reach the people, by circumventing or coopting the traditional media.

In the era of Watergate and the Pentagon Papers, the system had worked, with individuals and institutions upholding their constitutional duties to inform the public and punish corrupt officials. By the era of Iran-Contra, some individuals within the system continued to do their jobs, but the institutions had stopped working. Almost no one was held accountable and the cover-up was largely succeeded.

By the era of WikiLeaks, people around the world had come to view the system and

its functionaries as corrupt and untrustworthy. The tough-minded press corps of the Pentagon Papers and Watergate was a distant memory, replaced by what former CIA analyst Ray McGovern calls the "Fawning Corporate Media."

Facing that reality, some individuals usually from outside the traditional news media have created new (and fragile) media institutions on the Internet, seeking transparency against government secrecy and fighting for at least some measure of accountability.

This has been a far-from-ideal solution. Web sites, even ones like WikiLeaks which gained worldwide notoriety, have been unable to demonstrate the staying power and the influence of news outlets like the New York Times and the Washington Post. But the fact that millions of people now look to Internet sites (or cable-TV comedy shows) for information they can trust speaks volumes about how far the U.S. news media has slid over the past four decades.

So, if we were assessing how well the post-Watergate CIA-style covert operation worked, we'd have to conclude that it was remarkably successful. Even after George W. Bush took the United States to war in Iraq under false pretenses and even after he authorized the torture of detainees in the "war on terror," no one involved in those decisions has faced any accountability at all.

When high-flying Wall Street bankers brought the world's economy to its knees with risky gambles in 2008, Western governments used trillions of dollars in public moneys to bail the bankers out. But not one senior banker faced prosecution.

Upon taking office in 2009, President Obama saw little choice but to "look forward, not backward." And, in all honesty, given the state of the American political/media process, it is hard to envision how he would have proceeded against what would have been a powerful phalanx of Establishment forces opposed to prosecuting Bush, Wall Street CEOs and their underlings.

Another measure of how the post-Watergate counteroffensive succeeded would be to note how very well America's oligarchy had done financially in the past few decades. Not only has political power been concentrated in their hands, but the country's wealth, too.

One can argue that there have been some bright spots in recent years. There has been some improvement in the U.S. press corps since its humiliation over the Iraq War. For instance, there was some good work done exposing the Bush administration's torture policies and the CIA's secret prisons. The emergence of independent Internet sites also has forced the mainstream media to compete for a share of credibility.

However, it's also true that the U.S. press corps is making some of the same mistakes regarding the confrontation with Iran that were made over Iraq. And, many of the key journalists from 2003 remain in place in 2012. The absence of accountability has spread from government to the media itself. The makings are there for yet another catastrophe.

So, a sad but I think fair conclusion would be that at least for the time being, perception management has won out over truth. But the struggle over information and democracy has entered another new and unpredictable phase.

[To read more of Robert Parry's writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
