

JULY 7

Judith Miller: Drum major for war

Judy, it's been so many wars since we've talked. Now people are hailing your dedication to the principle of journalistic independence. For many, you will always be the courageous reporter who went to jail. But I'll always remember what happened when we met under hot lights and you showed your stuff.

Far from today's headlines, what will endure is your approach to journalism in a time of war. (And in this era, what other time is there?) Long before your current stratospheric fame, you were upholding the media spirit that has made you emblematic of the nation's press.

Of course there are some who still recall how you pushed stories about Saddam and WMDs onto the front page of the New York Times. And they remember that officials who helped to funnel disinformation into your articles grew fond of going on television to cite them as evidence that the Iraqi regime was a menace to the world.

But you were no overnight sensation. Your type of zeal about war was long apparent to those who cared to look.

Judy, we all know that memory can be foggy. But a transcript can help bring it back. The way we were...

[CNN — Friday, April 9, 1999:]

ROGER COSSACK, HOST: Norman Solomon, rate for us how the coverage has been so far in this adventure that we have in Yugoslavia.

NORMAN SOLOMON, MEDIA CRITIC: I would rate the fourth estate as functioning more like a fourth branch of government. We just saw this Pentagon briefing in the last half-hour, where the Pentagon officials did their thing, which was video games trying to depict the dropping of 2,000-pound bombs as though it was just some kind of blip on screens. But we also saw the press corps in that room — in the Pentagon — beamed around the world, not posing even softball question — I would call them beach-ball questions — in which the press corps uses, adopts, internalizes and puts

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out into the world similar assumptions and terminologies used by the military.

Now generals are going to talk in terms of collateral damage, degrade, bombing campaign, air campaign, to try to use euphemisms, to turn this into something where Americans can distance from the destruction being wrought in our name with our tax dollars. But all those phrases I just mentioned were used by reporters without any reference to the underlying meanings underneath those euphemisms.

So I would have to rate the journalists of this country very poor in covering this war, and frankly it dovetails with the strategy that has been implemented by the White House and the State Department and the Pentagon. Fourteen months ago, they learned when you go to the public, as Albright and Cohen and Sandy Berger did at Ohio State University, and you raise these issues, ask for public response and debate, they didn't like what they got. This time they haven't taken the risk. They have retreated to the briefing rooms and the TV studios with non-stop propaganda. We can expect that from government officials. We should demand more of that from the press.

COSSACK: Judith Miller, Norman Solomon says that the press has become an ally of NATO in what is being accomplished in Yugoslavia. Do you agree or disagree?

JUDITH MILLER, "NEW YORK TIMES": I couldn't disagree more. I mean, I think that what we've just seen is one small part of the day's coverage, which is a Pentagon briefing. I mean, if you look at, certainly, my newspaper, you see reports from all over the world, not just from the Pentagon briefing room. And I think that, if anything, this was a war that was kind of prompted by public outrage to the pictures that were shown on CNN, to the stories that were told in "The New York Times" and other papers.

COSSACK: But, Judy, isn't that exactly what the argument is: that this was a war that was prompted by pictures that the public has seen, and the public only sees certain pictures, which causes us to think a certain way?

MILLER: I think it's hard to take pictures of the Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovo when we were kicked out of there. That, too, is a form of manipulation of the press. And I think the journalists are doing the best they possibly can to bring all sides of the story to readers and to viewers, but there are limits set, in part, by the people we're covering.

DANIEL SCHORR, NEWS ANALYST, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO: May I agree with my friend, Judy? Hello, Judy.

MILLER: Hi, Daniel.

SCHORR: Let me say this: During the Vietnam War, we used to get briefings, which came to be known as "the 5 o'clock follies," about body count — grossly exaggerated — about successes that weren't there. What happened was we got a whole gener-

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ation of journalists, starting, say, with people like David Halberstam, Peter Arnett, who say, "Let me go out there and see what's happening."

The result of that was the Pentagon's ability to lull the public may have collapsed, maybe forever as a result of the fact that a reporter said, "They're lying to you. They're lying to you. Let's show you what's actually happening here."

It takes it time to get started. The fact that the reporters can't get everywhere in Yugoslavia right now makes it more difficult, but even after the Gulf War, with all of the smart bombs you heard about, later we heard that most of the bombs were dumb and that most of the Patriots didn't find their target. In the end, they can say what they want. We'll catch up with them.

SOLOMON: Let me say that there's always an excuse that journalists use when they attach themselves to the basic assumptions of the Pentagon and the war planners and in this case the war makers. You can have tactical debates until you're blue in the face — and we have plenty of those — but the reality is that certain pictures get on television through the prompting and the urging and the showcasing of the Pentagon and the White House and certain pictures don't get on.

COSSACK: Norman, is that necessarily wrong that certain pictures are put on because of the prompting of the White House and the Pentagon?

SOLOMON: Well, you know, that — those judgments — I think those judgments need to be made by independent journalists, not by spin masters who work in the White House and the State Department day after day, precisely trying to come up with, featuring, and setting the stage for pictures like this, on the cover of "Time" and "Newsweek," which preach very well into their spin.

COSSACK: You're not making a claim — you're not making a claim that the pictures that we see regarding the refugees...

SOLOMON: They're very real. They're very important.

COSSACK: ... that they're untrue, are you? You're not claiming that they are untrue, are they — are you?

SOLOMON: No, they're very important pictures to see. There are other pictures that need to be seen, including ones of the devastation underneath the bombs, which are being reported by the London "Independent" today, by and other news agencies around the world...

SCHORR: Oh, you mean the pictures...

SOLOMON: There are also pictures that have been shown in other parts of the world about the effects of the Turkish government's ethnic cleansing, if you will, of the Kurds in Turkey, and you don't see, in this case, Ms. Miller or Mr. Schorr going on and on on

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the air or in print day after day, year after year, about the fact that the U.S. government is aiding and allied with their NATO partner Turkey in crushing the people who are Kurds in southeastern Turkey, in some ways similar to what that demagogue and brutal dictator Milosevic has been doing to the Albanians in Kosovo.

SCHORR: I think that's an amazing point of view. If you want to see what's happening in Belgrade, Milosevic will be very to show you every place where there was — excuse me — collateral damage, where civilian targets happened to be hit. I suggest that you're telling me that I'd rather believe Milosevic than believe the Pentagon?

SOLOMON: No, what we need is independent journalists, not those who serve as functionaries for the propaganda machinery in Washington.

MILLER: You know, you keep making that charge, Norman,...

COSSACK: All right, let me...

MILLER: ... but I don't see anything that supports that, where enough of the nation's newspapers...

COSSACK: Let me just interrupt you all...

MILLER: That's just not true.

SOLOMON: I'm looking at the pattern of coverage. ... I think the problem is selectivity. All of the suffering that's being depicted that the Albanian-Kosovars have gone through is very newsworthy. So is the suffering of the Kurds in Turkey. But we are not seeing those pictures, we're not seeing those pictures, we're not hearing journalists raise that to a high-profile issue, precisely because Turkey is a part of NATO.

COSSACK: Judith Miller are we seeing...

MILLER: No.

COSSACK: Judith Miller are we seeing enough of what the damage that is being caused in Belgrade to the Serbs? Have we seen enough of that?

MILLER: I think we have. I think we've seen a lot of it, and I thought we saw a lot of it from Baghdad, when American bombers were dropping payloads and bombs, and we didn't call it "collateral damage." Those terms are used in quotation marks. We don't use those euphemisms for war — which is ugly — and I think the media are showing as much of it as they possibly can.

But the issue is all forms of suffering are not equal, I'm sorry. It seems to me that Americans are being told that this bombing was brought about by Mr. Milosevic's refusal to accept a political settlement that had been agreed upon by everyone except him, and that is what has caused the bombing, and therefore the ethnic cleansing and the pictures that you see are not comparable in terms of a political calculation to the bombs that are falling, because the leader of that country will not accept the Ram-

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bouillet accord that could have prevented this violence. It is a huge problem for the world.

SOLOMON: Well, I think we're...

COSSACK: All right, let me jump in here and take a break for a second. Do you believe everything you see? We'll talk about how images can change public opinion next.

Stay with us....

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

COSSACK: The CNN/"USA Today" Gallup poll might demonstrate how images on television can influence public opinion. The poll taken this week shows 47 percent now favor the use of ground troops in the Yugoslavia conflict if airstrikes are not effective, compared with just 31 percent on March 25. The reason they give for that support, 67 percent say to help the refugees.

Well, Daniel Schorr, I think that that is a great example of how our thoughts are manipulated, if you will, by what we see. Let me give you an example: Do you think — many people, many Serbians, believe that KLA, the Kosovo Liberation Army, if you will — believes that they are — calls them terrorists, yet we never really saw images of what they did. Is that fair?

SCHORR: Sure it's fair, because what they did now doesn't matter any more; they've been destroyed, more or less, as a fighting force.

And I don't know what you call fairness in a thing like this. If you have a band of people out there, some of whom may have been gangster, some of whom are rebels, some of whom are motivated by nationalist ideas, trying to fight against a tyrant sitting there in Belgrade, well clearly you'll find that the American has more sympathy for the one who's fighting for his life than the one who's trying to kill him.

But what really influenced the Americans, more than the KLA or more than what was happening in Belgrade, were the pictures of — these terrible, terrible refugee pictures. Americans, on the whole, are a fairly sentimental people about things like that, and when they see a half a million people there huddled in the rain dying, having either — they were shot, or if they get there have to live there in that kind of misery, an American will say, "I don't think we ought to stand for that," and it's a very good, hearty impression that you get of Americans.

COSSACK: Norman, your response to that — my question, of course, was we never saw the other side of what the KLA has been charged with doing by the Serbs. The

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question of fairness is, Americans have to make informed decisions so they can vote; are we able to make informed decisions from what we see?

SOLOMON: Well, we're getting part of the picture, and I think this is an example of how so much media coverage is policy-driven out of the Oval Office and out of Foggy Bottom. The reality is that there's another part of the picture that needs to be seen as well. It doesn't negate at all the horrible realities that do need to be exposed that the Kosovar-Albanians have gone through, but, again, if the same pictures were shown of the victims of the KLA; if the same pictures were shown of the victims of a U.S.-supported regime in Colombia, which is one of the most murderous, deadly countries on the planet; if we'd seen similar heart-rending pictures — and they are available — of the Kurds inside Turkey, that would also evoke enormous compassionate response from the American people.

The Oval Office has a man in it who is making policy not to show those pictures to the American people. And I think we've heard, in this last few minutes, another example of how fine American journalists are very good at articulating the premises of U.S. foreign policy, but guess what? That's not supposed to be their job as journalists. They're supposed to function independently. They're not just supposed to show us a window on the world that is tinted red, white and blue, but unfortunately that's most of what we're getting.

COSSACK: Judith, is the window on the world tinted red, white and blue?

MILLER: No, I think Norman's is tinted anti-red, white and blue, but that's irrelevant.

SOLOMON: There you are baiting me as not patriotic because I'm raising questions to journalists.

MILLER: Excuse me, when you call us — when you call Dan and me shills for the White House...

SOLOMON: Your word.

MILLER: ... we think we can object to that.

SOLOMON: It's your word.

SCHORR: The White House objects.

MILLER: I'm not going to do this. I'm simply going to say that if you just open your eyes and look at television or read the papers you can find, not only descriptions of what's happening there and around that area, you can find many, many descriptions of tragedies, of human rights crises in many parts of the world.

The fact of the matter is the concentration right now on Yugoslavia and on Kosovo is

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because the United States is at war there, and that is our preoccupation at the moment.

I would like to be in different places. I have stood with the Kurds, as they flooded out of Iraq. I have been with the Sudanese, when they — when no one cared that they were dying. I'm very grateful that the media are there with their cameras to capture these human rights abuses so that Americans will get upset about them, and will want their government to do the right thing.

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." A review in the Los Angeles Times last week said the book "offers 16 brutally persuasive chapters, each centered on a perennial falsehood, such as 'If This War Is Wrong, Congress Will Stop It,' 'This Is About Human Rights' and 'This Is Not at All About Oil or Corporate Profits.'" The first chapter is posted at: www.War-MadeEasy.com