

SEPTEMBER 20

The media knocks Bush – and props him up

This month we've heard a lot of talk about journalists who got tough with President Bush. And it's true that he has been on the receiving end of some fiercely negative media coverage in the wake of the hurricane. But the mainstream U.S. press is ill-suited to challenging the legitimacy of the Bush administration.

The country's largest media institutions operate on a basis of enormous respect for presidential power. Major news organizations defer to that power even while venting criticisms. Overall, mass media outlets restrain the momentum of denunciations lest they appear to create instability for the Republic.

Initially, when the lethal character of Bush's "leadership" became clear in New Orleans, the journalistic focus on federal accountability was quick to bypass the president. For several days, the national political story seemed to mostly revolve around the flak-catching FEMA director, Michael Brown, a cipher who obviously was going to be tossed overboard by the administration.

On Tuesday, the day after Brown resigned, President Bush adjusted the damage-control weaseling. "Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government," he said at the White House, "and to the extent that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility."

It was a classic hollow statement, meant to sound important and meaningless at the same time. On Wednesday, more than a dozen paragraphs into its story headlined "President Says He's Responsible in Storm Lapses," the New York Times reported: "In saying he took responsibility for any failures of the federal response to the storm, Mr. Bush stopped short of acknowledging that he or anyone else had made mistakes."

So, according to the Times headline, Bush said that "he's responsible" for "storm lapses" – but, according to the article, Bush did not say "that he or anyone else had made mistakes." Got that?

Such tap-dancing evasions are small compared to what's on the horizon. With a prime-time speech Thursday night from Louisiana, followed by a ceremonial service at the National Cathedral in Washington the next morning, Bush will use the stature of

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the presidency to pose as an icon of can-do patriotism and piety.

Sure, we can expect more outcries of condemnation from the nation's press. Many news outlets have adopted a critical tone unmatched by previous coverage of the Bush administration. But you might read the editorials of virtually every daily newspaper in the United States and not find a single paper calling for the impeachment or resignation of the deadly Bush-Cheney duo, whether for deceptions about Iraq or failures to protect lives from Hurricane Katrina.

By avoiding even the hint that President Bush and Vice President Cheney should be ousted from office, major news outlets are circumscribing public discourse and limiting the prospective remedies. Meanwhile, we hear about low-level resignations, official investigations and proposals for blue-ribbon commissions.

What happened to thousands of people in the path of the hurricane was the horrific result of criminal negligence that came from the top of the U.S. government. Is it too outlandish to suggest that the news media begin to discuss what kind of punishment would truly fit the crime?

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"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

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