

How the media muzzles the 9/11 story

By Danny Schechter

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Janet Jackson went from being a cartoon on TV to playing one this past weekend. The singer who outraged one America with her “costume malfunction” during a Superbowl half-time show, giving new meaning to the phrase “boob tube,” delighted another America when she appeared costumed as a Condoleeza Rice look-alike on Saturday Night Live.

Janet as Condi captured the well-rehearsed calculations so evident in the National Security Advisors’s stellar performance before the 9/11 Commission even if her shtick ended with another sophomoric, but this time, electronically concealed “breast reveal.” The comedy bit spoofed the Made for TV qualities of Condi’s filibuster-like appearance by inter-cutting the actual footage of Chairman Tom Kean’s pro-forma welcome to Ms. Rice with Janet Jackson’s mimicking her feigned smiles and tense body language.

In this TV age, news quickly turns into entertainment as tragedy is transformed into comedy. Rice had earlier been the butt of jokes on late night comedy shows all reported on by ABC’s This Week to add some mirth to that program’s usually deadly demeanor.

Five hours before the spoof was seen, the White House released a portion of a censored (i.e. “redacted”) Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB) of August 6th 2001 warning President Bush that Osama bin Laden wanted to attack targets in the United States. The Commander in Chief was then enjoying a month long vacation in Crawford Texas (where he was again last week) despite calls by jittery anti-terrorism specialists for FBI offices and others in the government to cancel all leave in the weeks leading up to 9/11.

The fact that this PDB, or portions of it, was released at 6 pm on a Saturday night over an Easter Weekend – a time of low news watching – was evidence of an Administration desire to bury it.

Administration officials had earlier deliberately leaked portions of it to some media outlets to prepare public opinion, to take the sting off its content while putting some spin on. This advance “media planning” speaks to how manipulative post PR “perception management” has become.

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Carolyn Kay of Maketthemaccountable.com charges that Bush political svengali Karl Rove stage-managed the forced release: “Why? Because there’s damaging information in the August 6 briefing, which Rove will have to release soon, and he’s getting out ahead of it. Our wonderful mainstream media have been suckered over and over again by this administration, and there’s no reason to think this isn’t a sucker play as well. The storyline about the memo and what it contains will have already been set in concrete by the time the memo is released.”

The White House went back and forth on how to handle the document. In her testimony, Rice downplayed its importance by calling its revelations merely “historical.” In its news columns The New York Times, in effect, said, au contraire, labeling it “historic” in a front page report: “The release of the document was itself historic; no White House has ever made public a copy of a President’s Daily Brief, a document that has been produced by the C.I.A. for presidents since the 1960’s. An accompanying briefing paper for reporters sought to downplay its significance.

Times Columnist Maureen Dowd flipped that phrase saying Rice should have taken the threat more seriously. “What should have made Condi hysterical, she deemed “historical,” Dowd quipped in her Sunday column.

What’s striking about the document itself is not how serious its warning was, but how shoddy, superficial and dated its information appears to have been. A young journalism student would get flunked for turning in a such a shallow report to an 8th grade class.

“Unimpressive” is how NBC’s Lisa Myers understated it on Meet The Press. The document cites information provided by unnamed foreign intelligence agencies but few updates from the CIA or FBI. At a time when intelligence “chatter” was said to be everywhere, none of it was passed on to the man in charge.

The details were sketchy. There is no evidence that the President threw the document in the face of his briefers and demanded more detail. As far as we know, he didn’t even google for more.

This makes a good case for more than incompetence especially when compared to the careful conspiring of the terror groups which apparently spent years planning their attack.

The mainstream media has focused on White House rhetoric, not the lack of intelligence in what passes for “intelligence,” or the President’s delay in acting even when informed of a serious threat.

But there is a deeper media clash evident here as well about how to understand the meaning of what we are learning, and which sources to trust.

First, there is the role of American mainstream media which for nearly two years, for the most part, resisted the kind of probing that the 911 Commission is now appearing to do. (It

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has its harsh critics too who say it is whitewashing the issues!)

For months on end, many media outlets celebrated the 911 victims and “heroes” while giving the White House a pass on what really happened and why. Few critical questions were raised in a climate of self-censorship posing as patriotic correctness.

Next, consider other media around the world, Elements of the European media stepped into the breach with more questioning articles and critical columns, conspiracy theories not even reported in the United States became part of the mainstream discourse in France, England, Germany, South Asia and the Arab world.

Unlike in the United States, these allegations were not confined to discussion on the margins.

In a recent column, referring to one bombshell of a story about the charges of Sibel Edwards, a former FBI translator, a Washington Post columnist excuses the US media refusal to highlight her claims on the grounds that media outlets here are hesitant to carry unproven allegations, as if single sourced articles and Administration leaked information are not commonplace in American media.

“Perhaps U.S. news organizations are prudently laying off a story that may not be true while foreign editors are less scrupulous,” writes The Post’s Jefferson Morley.

“Less scrupulous? Perhaps?”

Another possibility: Perhaps, just perhaps, those outlets are more independent in their analysis than a US media that often marches in lockstep with the government.

Finally, all traditional media outlets, here and abroad, are being challenged by a feisty internet media that has become the driver on this story. They are the new media outsiders challenging the old media insiders

Most of the ideas, questions, theories, speculations, and detailed critiques now being taken serious were first raised on the internet by hundreds of website including one that offers a detailed “timeline” of the President’s whereabouts on September 11th. (www.911timeline.net)

Self-appointed Citizen investigators led by 911 victim family members and groups like 911 Citizen Watch have stepped into the breach as well with an avalanche of new book books, photos, and documents together constituting a “counter-narrative” of 911.

Don’t forget it was outsider family members who forced the insiders in a reluctant government to even mount the 911 investigation. Their tone is far angrier than most of the coverage, even as many of these researchers disagree with each other as much as they do the Bush Administration.

Their latest debate revolves around a new book that has been discussed in London’s Independent but not yet in the US Media. It is “The New Pearl Harbor.” by David Ray

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Griffin, a philosopher of religion at the Claremont School of Religion. Nick Welsh reports: “Griffin all but accuses the Bush administration of taking a dive on September 11 and giving Al Qaeda terrorists an unobstructed shot at the World Trade Center. According to Griffin, a case can be made that the Bush administration arranged the attack, or allowed it to happen.”

Welsh details his views and then asks about the media coverage:

Welsh: “You’ve complained the American media has been asleep at the switch on this (story). How do you account for this?”

Griffin: “It is very difficult for Americans to face the possibility that their own government may have caused or deliberately allowed such a heinous event. Secondly one can understand that insofar as the media is owned by companies like General Electric, which is one of the largest makers of weapons, stations like NBC that are owned by GE would not wish to publicize these connections. . .

“I at least hope that if we can begin to get a public discussion of 9/11 and of the many, many discrepancies between the official story and what at least appear to be the facts, that some of those people might be emboldened to step forward.” (<http://independent.com/news/news906.htm>)

911 has now become an issue on two fronts: in presidential politics and in a continuing media debate.

Years ago, in the aftermath of the Watts riots, Lyndon Johnson appointed another Governor to lead a similar Presidential Commission to investigate the causes of a national crisis, the black uprisings that rocked our cities. The Kerner Commission concluded that we lived in “two Americas, one white and one black.” That Commission also had a side panel examining the role the press played in ignoring the protests and pain of the black community. That body excoriated the media for its role.

That Presidential body concluded: “We have found a significant imbalance between what actually happened and what the newspapers, radio television coverage of the riots told us happened...This may be understandable but it is not excusable in an institution that has the mission to inform and educate the whole of our society.”

That was 1968, 36 years ago.

Such a panel is needed today to probe the media role in 911 and Iraq. The reason: we still live in two Americas. One informed; the other kept in the dark

News Dissector Danny Schechter writes a daily blog for [Mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org), His latest book is “Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception How the Media Failed to cover the war in Iraq.” (Prometheus Books)