

Krugman: A reckoning for media machine

By Rory O'Connor

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“I try to write only about economics,” says Paul Krugman with a smile and a shrug. But in the next breath Krugman admits that his best-selling book, *The Great Unraveling*, “is really about politics and not economics.” The same may be said of Krugman’s scathing Op-Ed columns in *The New York Times*, which have undoubtedly earned him a high place on the White House’s media enemy list.

Krugman is an unlikely radical. The Princeton economist identifies himself as a “moderate liberal,” and a “free-market Keynesian,” and swears he didn’t plan things this way. “The original idea for my column came in 1999 from (ex-Times editor) Howell Raines,” he remembers.

“Howell explained it to me like this – ‘We have five guys writing about the Middle East and no one writing about the economy!’” But Krugman was soon radicalized by events, and what he calls persistent and deliberate lies by the Bush Administration.

“I had a bad feeling about Bush, from an economic standpoint, as far back as the 2000 presidential campaign,” says Paul Krugman, “I just felt ‘My God, he’s lying through his teeth!’”

Krugman, who worked as a staffer at the Council of Economic Advisers during the Reagan administration, says his government experience taught him that “What you see in one agency or area can usually be applied to an entire administration.

In other words, if they are lying about the budget, they’re probably lying about other things as well – like, say, the presence of WMD in Iraq, or ‘links’ between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

“It came into particular focus right after 9/11,” says Krugman, “When I began hearing spin and political explanations of the attacks while the buildings were still burning.”

We now know, of course, that what Krugman was hearing was the beginning of the buildup to the Iraq War. “I had no special background in this stuff,” he says. “But to me, it sounded exactly like the selling of the tax cuts! I said to myself, ‘They’re pulling the same stuff again!’”

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“And then along came this political nightmare,” he says. “And for a while it looked like I was one of the only people who could say what was really happening.”

Krugman admits that the right’s vituperative reaction to what he wrote, and the aggressive and personal attacks that resulted, “were very scary for a while.” He feels fortunate that he is not a professional, career journalist. “I had another job to go back to,” he says thankfully – which was a good thing, since “the New York Times was beginning to get nervous!”

Krugman’s writing – like all noteworthy journalism – consistently makes publishers nervous. That’s what happened to his book publishers when he handed them *The Great Unraveling*, complete with a fiery introduction he had finished the day after Baghdad fell to U.S. forces.

As he notes in the introduction to the new paperback edition (which features three new chapters, consisting of columns he wrote after the war ‘ended,’) he had gone “out on a limb” with the book: “I wasn’t just extremely critical of the Bush administration at a moment of triumph, when TV screens were showing, over and over again, scenes of the toppling of Saddam’s statue. I went beyond criticism of specific policies to argue that the Bush administration poses a challenge to America as we know it.”

And like all noteworthy journalism, Krugman’s writing is as much about the media as it is about the events they cover, uncover, miscover, and ignore. As he wrote in *The Great Unraveling*, “I was also saying that much of the public and most of the media were missing the real story of what was happening in America.

“When the book first came out, it was pretty crazy,” says Krugman. “I was saying the same things I had been saying for several years – but now people began telling me, ‘Thank God someone is finally being honest!’”

Others, of course, were busy denouncing Krugman. But then those same people were busy calling the BBC the “Baghdad Broadcasting Company” and terming the New York Times the “Saddam News Service.”

“So far it has come out all right,” Krugman admits. “But the first time you get an avalanche of angry mail from people the National Review has sicced on you, it can be daunting . . . A lot of journalists get their first taste of it and simply shear off into self-censorship. If you say something different, if you see the world the way I do, you can get marginalized. It’s scary, very frightening . . . but it requires as a matter of public duty that you put yourself on the firing line.

“My situation is different from others, however, and I’m very lucky for it,” he says. “If The New York Times had fired me, my income would have gone up and my life would have gotten easier!”

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Does Krugman perceive a crisis in American media? Yes – and no. “My impression is that the pressure has always been there – so why is the situation so much worse now? Are the people in power more apt to abuse their position now? What happened to the days of Edward R. Murrow?”

Krugman believes part of the answer is to be found in the extreme polarization of our political discourse “There is no longer any middle to appeal to, no moderates left to speak to,” he avers. “Instead we get this false objectivity, a sort of ‘On the one hand this, and on the other hand that’ style of reporting. Or we get extreme partisanship, where the ‘facts’ are treated as part of a movement . . . or a large part of the media is anxious to be perceived as ‘objective,’ while at the same time being consistently mau-maued, and much more by an aggressive right than by the left.”

In any event, Krugman says his bosses at The New York Times “are pretty happy with me at this point, [Small wonder, in light of their recent ‘clarification’ of other Times reportage from that period] after having been ‘rattled’ in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War.

“Their belief at the time was that the left wasn’t a commercially viable force, and that liberals, for example, wouldn’t buy books,” he says with a best-seller’s smile.

That canard put to bed, Krugman says it’s time for a showdown. “Can we break the machine that is imposing right-wing radicalism on the United States?” he asks. “The scariest part is that the media is part of that machine. There will have to be some kind of reckoning soon, a possible Watergate moment to come. . . Things aren’t all the way unraveled yet . . . and alternative scenarios still exist.

“We need above all sunlight! We need to see what is actually going on,” he concludes. “When are people going to wake up?”

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