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Media propaganda and the Afghan debacle

In the wake of the collapse of the US puppet government in Afghanistan over the weekend, the media and political establishment have been consumed by the question: How they were so disastrously “caught off guard” by the extremely rapid collapse of the regime in Kabul?

The answer to this question has a great deal to do with the role of the media itself. One of the traditional functions of the bourgeois press is not only to inform the public, but to inform the ruling class. The American media, however, has been completely transformed into a state propaganda machine. In the process, the ruling class has created an instrument not only of deception, but of self-deception. The deluders became the deluded.



Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, right, with U.S. Army Major Gen. William Taylor, Joint Staff Operations, during a media briefing at the Pentagon on August 17, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

A major lesson that the ruling class drew from the Vietnam War was the necessity to “control the narrative,” which meant to control the media. Media reporting of the horrific reality of the war was a significant factor in turning public opinion, and not a few prominent journalists, including CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite following the 1968 Tet Offensive, spoke out openly against it.

The ruling class concluded that if it could limit the reporting of bad news—which meant limiting the reporting of the truth—it could shape the outcome of its imperialist operations. The Gulf War in 1991 against Iraq marked a significant stage in this process, with the media dutifully parroting the propaganda of the first Bush administration. One of the only journalists who reported on the devastation wrought by American bombs, CNN correspondent Peter Arnett, was denounced by the White House as a tool of Saddam Hussein. In 1999, Arnett was forced out of the network after a manufactured scandal over his reporting on “Operation Tailwind.”

The transformation of the media into a mouthpiece of the military was made explicit in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, as the administration of George W. Bush prepared for war in Afghanistan. Dan Rather, the lead anchor for CBS News, summed up the cowardly prostration of the media before the state when he declared on September 17, “George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions. And as an American wherever he wants me to line up, tell me where and he’ll make the call.”

In late October 2001, three weeks after the war began, CNN Chairman Walter Isaacson sent a memo to the network’s international correspondents ordering them to “balance” any reports of civilian casualties from US warplanes with statements “about how the Taliban have harbored the terrorists responsible for” the September 11, 2001 attacks. He told the *Washington Post* at the time that it “seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.”

CNN’s “head of standards and practices” prescribed that all its anchors include specific language in their reports justifying the war, such as, “The Pentagon has repeatedly stressed

that it is trying to minimize civilian casualties in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the September 11 attacks that claimed thousands of innocent lives in the US.”

This set the “standards and practices” for the entire media during the 20-year-long occupation. It covered up the horrific atrocities associated with the war’s initial stages, including the torture and massacre of thousands of prisoners by US-backed warlords near Mazar-i-Sharif in November 2001. The continuous devastation wrought by US bombs and drone strikes, the inestimable corruption and criminality of the various US proxies brought in to lead the “democratic” government, went largely unreported for the past two decades.

What began with Afghanistan was escalated with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The military and media collaborated directly in the institutionalization of “embedded reporters,” beginning with some 700 journalists who were stationed with military units. Explaining the purpose of the program, US Marine Corps Lt. Col. Rick Long said at the time, “Our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment.”

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, the media participated in selling the war by recapitulating government lies about “weapons of mass destruction.” During the invasion, it dutifully presented military propaganda depicting joyous “liberated” Iraqis. After the invasion and during the occupation, it aided in the government persecution of those who sought to expose what was really taking place, including Chelsea Manning and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. Throughout the entire process, it worked to exclude widespread anti-war sentiment from the framework of the official “debate.”

The same people who cheered the war in Afghanistan for the past 20 years—Wolf Blitzer, Martha Raddatz, Andrea Mitchell, Brian Williams (who said of Trump’s airstrikes in Syria in 2017 that he was awed by the “beauty of our weapons”), and countless others—are now providing the commentary on the debacle it has produced.

None of these well-paid “journalists” think to question the underlying premises that led them to get everything so disastrously wrong in the first place. That the US launched the war to “defeat terrorism,” to “promote democracy,” and to “protect women and girls,” is accepted as given. In the endless coverage on the cable and network stations, and in the

pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other major newspapers, one will not find a single voice who opposed the war or has anything critical to say about the political and social interests behind it. The “expert commentators” are inevitably drawn from the well-stocked supply of ex-generals and ex-intelligence agents who have “embedded” themselves in the media.

This applies as well, or perhaps especially, to the “liberal” media. MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, who at one point was presented as a “left” journalist, produced a comment on Monday full of indignation that “the military, the Afghan military we spent all these years building, did not want to fight.” “We” spent all this money, she complained, and “they really just did hand over the keys when the time came.”

More than 10 years ago, in July 2010, Maddow spent several days in Afghanistan to “report” on the US military occupation, glorifying the “nation-building” operations of the US generals to whom she spoke. At one point, Maddow praised the US prison center in Bagram, used as a holding center for prisoners tortured in CIA black sites or about to be transported to Guantanamo Bay. The best chance of holding off the Taliban, Maddow declared, “is law and order, and part of law and order is locking people up.”

Such is the American media—a system of delusion and self-delusion, in which the propagandists come to believe their own propaganda and are astonished when reality comes crashing down upon them.

To complete the absurdity of the whole enterprise, the media has, particularly over the past five years, participated in the effort to brand all truthful reporting as “fake news.” Outlets outside of the “authoritative sources”—the “gatekeepers” of public opinion—have been targeted for censorship by Google, Facebook and other platforms, supposedly for spreading “misinformation.” This has applied above all to the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has an unparalleled record of coverage on the two-decade long occupation of Afghanistan.

The media’s long and ignominious trail of lies and propaganda applies not only to the war in Afghanistan, but also, and perhaps more significantly, to the country waging it. For all the talk about the failure to establish “democracy” in Afghanistan, no one in the establishment media can speak honestly about the state of “democracy” in the United

States, which has, over the past year, teetered on the brink of dictatorship, or the social relations underlying it.

The catastrophe inflicted on Afghanistan is an outward expression of the criminality of American capitalism. The past 20 years of military occupation have been 20 years of political, social and cultural decay of the American ruling class and all its institutions, including the media itself. And if the media is “caught off guard” by the collapse in Kabul, it will be even more shocked by the eruption of social explosions within the United States.

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