

**Watching the Watchdog: How “Canada’s National Newspaper”
Missed The War on Freedom**
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The flip side of the “war on terror” has been the “war on freedom.” Disreali’s foreign policy was summed up with the phrase, *Imperium* abroad and *Libertas* at home. With the current imperialism of the United States, *Libertas* is being suspended at home as well. Over the past six years we have witnessed a rapid deterioration of the constitution in the United States both through covert executive initiatives (fraudulent elections, politicization of intelligence services, secret prisons, torture, mass domestic surveillance), and through legislation (Patriot Acts I and II, and the Military Commissions Act). For those familiar with the principles of liberal democracy and constitutionalism, there is no question that from 2001 to 2006 the US experienced a period of severe political decline. What is unanswered, however, is why the Canadian media have failed to cover this decline in a manner reflecting their vital social role. In a democracy, it is necessary to have a media that informs the public of significant events and activities so that they might hope to govern themselves wisely. The enclosure of constitutional rights in the United States is undoubtedly significant to Canadians. In this essay I argue that “Canada’s national newspaper,” *The Globe and Mail*, has been negligent in performing this duty.

I have chosen to focus on the *Globe* because it is widely respected for being of the high calibre in Canadian journalism. There are other quality papers in Canada, but the *Globe* purports to be the premier newspaper, and hence suggests it can deliver solid coverage of international politics. Aside from *The National Post*, all other Canadian newspapers are local papers. *The National Post* is explicitly conservative in its leaning, and hence it would be far less surprising and less interesting to find that it is blind to the deceptions of the conservative government in the US.

To support my argument I analyze the coverage of the announcement of President George Bush’s war on terror, and the coverage of the torture of detainees by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib. Based on an analysis of the *Globe’s* coverage and some insights from an interview with the *Globe’s* Foreign Editor, Stephen Northfield, I contend that this failure larger stemmed from an acceptance of the war on terror as a legitimate frame to understand the activities of the United States under the Bush administration.

In his address to a joint session of Congress and the American people on September 20th, 2001, President G.W. Bush reframed his presidency. His compassionate conservative mandate became “the war on terror.” The world had changed with the terrorist attacks nine days earlier, giving Bush a divinely sanctioned war to fight, with him basking in the purity of this righteous cause: “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.” This sacred fight, with Providence making victory predetermined, was going to be not just one brief battle, “but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen... Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”

With this Bush set the tone of his approach, and set the parameters of his powers. No dissent would be tolerated, and no limits would curb his power to seek reprisal. With open discourse cowed and international law discarded, he prepared his campaign, and it was one that would have no end: “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found,

stopped and defeated.” As it is unlikely that one can stop every terrorist group of global reach, it follows that he was launching an infinite war.

From the outset there have been numerous critics of this terminology, the primary concern being that in a time of war the president is given tremendous powers as the commander-in-chief, and citizens are generally more prepared to tolerate higher levels of government infringements on their rights and freedoms for the sake of security. While it is disputable whether the Constitution grants the powers presidents have come to assume in times of war, Congress has proved either unable or unwilling to use its authority to restrain that power. Thus, to accept his premise that the United States is engaged in a *war* on terror is to accept a legitimate enhancement of the president’s powers and a general curtailment of civil liberties within the US. To accept his “with us or against us” foreign policy is to accept the demise of national sovereignty that has been integral to maintaining peace since the Peace of Westphalia.

In a manner that is far from historically unprecedented, this new frame enabled Bush to begin enhancing his own powers and curtailing those of everyone else in the name of freedom. His war was that of freedom against fear, and any opposition to his initiatives has been quickly rebuked for hindering the defence of freedom at home and the spread of freedom abroad. He is the heroic and sacred defender of freedom, symbolizing the nation as a whole, so any dissent invoking freedom seems absurd and shrill. Indeed, more strongly, it is “against us” and with the terrorists. There is an absolute, monological purity of purpose in this agenda that defies the logic that humanity is necessarily pluralistic - the crooked timber of humanity, and all that.

In communication theory, framing of this sort is a central part of media analysis. The frame provides a narrative in which to contextualize the events and actions of the day. According to Stephen Reese, “frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (2001: 12). To put it differently, frames tell us how to think about certain subjects, and do so by appealing to biases. In this case, Bush appeals to our need for security and our anger at being attacked or threatened, along with our patriotism and compassion for those hurt or killed. And he appeals to our belief in freedom as our due. He then arranges the events of the day in terms of a familiar narrative, a war of good versus evil with the spirit of God at our back. The more culturally specific reference is that it is the continuance of the American Revolution, taking the dream of democratic freedom to the world. These are principles that are already embedded in our culture and our consciousness. We need only to apply them to the actions of this president. He weaves the symbols of the US into his stories and staging. While we are capable of rejecting the frame he provides, for many it is not the natural inclination. His words are given greater weight by the symbolic power of his office. As president, Bush stands as a symbol of the unity of the nation at a time of strife and instability, and there is a need among the citizens to feel strongly united and have confidence in his leadership (Paletz and Entman, 1981: 64).

Whether or not Bush’s framing takes hold is largely up to the news media and whether they transmit in tact as staged, or reframe it to reveal the elements he attempts to conceal. In this case, the media generally legitimized it. The implications of this are substantial as his frame comes with an explicit threat to everyone the world over that the

world's last super power is drawing a line in the sand. Herbert Gans argues that this form of legitimization implies control:

When the news media indulged in the flag waving and hyperpatriotism after 9/11 that they display at the start of every war, they support the government's ability to control opposition to the war. On a subtler level, the news media exert control by creating a mainstream snapshot of the country that excludes or downgrades competing snapshots. (2003: 75)

In making this point about news media legitimizing Bush's framing of 9/11, Gans argues that in this case it was less a question of the news media controlling the public perception and more a matter of the audience controlling the media. He contends that the audience was swept up in a patriotic fervour and would not countenance those taking an opposing or neutral stance toward the war on terror. There was no tolerance for efforts to understand the terrorists and why they hated America.

Here I would argue that Gans is missing the dialogic nature of the ideas swirling about. To embrace the president's message they must first have it presented to them by the media. The way the president chose to respond to the crisis and frame that response was peculiar to his approach and mandate. The president who is doing the framing, the media is adopting the frame, and the audience received, accepted and reinforced it. This is an example of a successful framing, and when it regenerates itself in this way it is called the spiral of opportunity. Had the framing failed, the framer would have retreated and adopted a new approach (Miller, Riecher, 2001: 108). The notion that the audience alone compelled the media to adopt the president's message implies that the news media is without choice in terms of how to interpret and present a story and those presenting the policy were able to intuit what path the citizens wished them to take. As will be made clear in the following discussion, there were choices.

For the moment, let us put causality aside. Let it be established that Bush well understood how to frame his agenda for his audience using the news media to convey his message, and on the whole his audience received and accepted his message.

The question is, did the news media accept and reinforce his frame, and could they have challenged it by introducing an alternative frame? More specifically, did *The Globe and Mail* adopt the "war on terror" frame and is it reasonable to have expected otherwise? An alternative frame that was adopted by some was to reinterpret the war on terror as a transparent rouse for a presidential war on freedom, both domestic and foreign. The implications here are significant. Beginning with his controversial electoral victory, G.W. Bush's presidency has been marred by an endless run of constitutional infringements that taken together amount to a massive enclosure of human freedoms. If it can be shown that Canadian news media facilitated this agenda by accepting their framing, either because of pressure from the elite or from the audience, or for some other reason, then they have shown themselves to be negligent in their political responsibility to inform the citizenry of abuses of power and act as a watchdog on behalf of the people.

The response of the *Globe* to Bush's speech was typical of the mainstream North American press. They covered the search for terrorists, the dangers terrorism posed, preparations for war against the Taliban (or the invasion of Afghanistan), and tightening security at the border. While this may have been standard, it does not mean it was objective or neutral. As Paletz and Entman point out, "news is not neutral ... to edit is to

interpret, to speak is to define, to communicate is to structure reality” (1981: 22). Reporting a story entails assuming an attitude about the subject and favouring some facts while obscuring others.

In the days immediately following Bush’s address, the *Globe* printed articles and editorials that revealed a certain awareness that the war on terror was not to be accepted without reflection. And yet the first reaction was hostility to any dissent. Marcus Gee editorial on September 22nd whole-heartedly embraces that this is indeed a war on terror, a war “between freedom and fear,” and strongly rebukes the columnist from the *Toronto Star* for trying to reframe it as a police action. Even here, however, he is aware of the potential for overreaction. John Ibbitson’s editorial goes over all the dangers we face and the likelihood of a terrorist attack in Canada.

Paul Koring’s dispatch from Washington addressed the concern that Bush’s description of terrorists could be dangerously limitless. His quotes from Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer and Brookings Institute fellow Thomas Mann give reassurances that the wording is vague in order to allow for “moving forward” and “providing help in combating terrorism.”

John Stackhouse’s article on the same day puts the “despotic Taliban in US crosshairs,” and quotes the exiled Afghan royal family who hope to reassume the throne to bring peace to Afghanistan.

The front-page story on September 22nd released poll results of Canadian attitude where it was found there was support for the war on terror as long as Canadian civilians were not killed (A1). In the same article, however, Jean Chrétien is put on the defensive for being insufficiently supportive of the war on terror. Ipsos-Ried president Darrell Bricker is quoted as referring to the prime minister as “ambivalent,” and having a “so-called ‘balanced approach’.” The article also quotes members of the opposition criticizing Chrétien for not standing with “our American allies” and for being “ponderous and ambiguous” in the face of the “foul and evil acts of terrorism.”

The attacks on Chrétien become a *Globe* staple. On page A4 of the same paper the views of people calling in to a radio programme are allotted 612 words to criticize the prime minister for not visiting Ground Zero.

The following edition of the *Globe*, Monday September 24th takes into account concerns about the new “war,” along with the official framing of the US military and security build up. Three lines are given to a peace protest in Montreal (A12). An article on page A7 reports the resistance of the Canadian government to excessive security measures. There is an article on the concerns of legal experts that the war on terror could legitimize the infringement of human rights. There is also a brief report of the US State Department pressuring Voice of America not to run a story that includes an interview with a Taliban leader. In the same edition there is also a frightening report of worldwide extremist networks and arrests, and a reassuring article on the “intelligent, controlled” Canadian general who would “lead Canada into the new war on terrorism.”

On September 25th the paper returns to the official line with heart warming story of Bush expressing affection for Canada, a disconcerting story on Bin Laden’s call for a holy war, the Ontario Legislature vowing to “stand with America” because of a shared love of freedom, Washington’s efforts to seize funds supporting terrorism, and a report of Canada’s new security measures.

The sensitivity to rights issues that came through on the 24th proves to be a rarity in the subsequent *Globe* coverage of the “war on terror.” While it emerges from time to time, the “war on terror” frame is generally accepted as the norm. Even as the war’s dark side begins to shock Western sensibilities, and the nature of those leading the war becomes increasingly evident, the *Globe* resists changing course. When news breaks of US troops torturing detainees in Abu Ghraib prison the tide of public opinion began to shift. In the war of freedom against fear there was no way for the public to reconcile that the notorious prison of Saddam Hussein was seeing more of the same under US control: Iraqis citizens were being held without due process and tortured, and according to some reports at the time this was done under the supervision of the intelligence personnel with sanction from US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. For those critical of the Bush administration’s war on terror from the start, this was indicative that democracy and freedom had little to do with this international the fight against fear. The *Globe* reports resisted this conclusion, instead accepting the Bush administration’s terminology that with was a case of prisoner “abuse” by a few individuals.

In the first report on April 29, 2004, the headline on page A1 asks, “Did US abuse prisoners in Iraq?” The article reports how the story broke and describes some of the forms of torture: beatings and hours of lying bound in the sun. The article includes reports that the perpetrators are already being prosecuted and the intensity of the fighting in Iraq is increasing. It is not until the next edition that the term torture is used, and then only in quotes from Amnesty International. These are immediately followed by US General Richard Myers playing down the reports: a few soldiers involved, fewer than two dozen Iraqi prisoners, perpetrators will face justice, US Department of Defence has high standards, and so on. The British are quoted as being skeptical that it happened at all.

The next day, Tuesday May 4th, the reports continue along the same lines, US officials are appalled while British officials are still wondering whether it is true. Iraqis supporting the US presence are quoted as feeling “duped.” The word torture is not printed. When the Foreign Editor of the *Globe*, Stephen Northfield, was asked why his paper insisted on using the term “abuse” rather than “torture” he had no firm explanation. He replied that the question had never occurred to him and that the newspaper does not have a policy delineating when it is appropriate to use the term *torture*. He offered only a guess, suggesting that the news emerged slowly and at first it was not clear whether these were random acts of individuals or a systemic policy.

An article on May 5th gives a first hand account of the brutality the prisoners underwent at Abu Ghraib. The article does not use the term *torture*, and it suggests that this was an isolated incident. Subsequently, the story of Abu Ghraib emerges incidentally as announcements are made by the US government on how they are dealing with the scandal. When finally Rumsfeld is forced to resign as Secretary of Defence, long after it is revealed that he approved using torture to interrogate prisoners, the *Globe*’s Paul Koring writes of “abuse at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison” (April 15, 2006: A2).

Although Northfield clearly regarded this as unimportant, and he certainly did not see it as evidence that the *Globe* supported the torture agenda of the Bush administration, it is not a neutral or passive act. Using the term abuse instead of torture suggests a mistake rather than a premeditated crime. It also excuses the perpetrator of all the associations we have with the term torture: shocking inhumane cruelty characteristic of tyrants and sadists. This is known as “priming,” a skill familiar to journalists, writers and

politicians. One's choice of terminology can influence the audience's perception by portraying events, issues or people. For instance, depending on one's values one might describe Hezbollah as a "terrorist organization" or "legitimate resistance movement." The Bush administration chose the term *abuse* for obvious reasons, and the *Globe* followed suit.

Politically, the significance of torture lies beyond mere cruelty. In terms of its associations, it suggests a rigidly oppressive regime, lacking the rule of law and the principles of equality and freedom. To connect this with the US war on terror was, it seems, too difficult for the *Globe* editors and journalists to stomach. If we accept Northfield's claim that it was not part of a conspiracy to undermine human freedom, which is likely a fair conclusion, then there must look elsewhere for the explanation.

First, it must be stated that the torture in Abu Ghraib was not, as first believed, a case of rogue guards engaging in random prisoner abuse. William Taft's 2002 memo outlining Bush's decision about the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to the Taliban and Al Qaeda establishes that Bush had cleared the way to allowing the torture of enemy combatants. This was further reinforced with the now infamous "Torture Memo" in which White House Legal Counsel Alberto Gonzales argues that torture is not illegal (Greenberg, 2006: 283, 317). And the detention of suspects without charges and with trial was not restricted to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. There was, and there may continue to be, a worldwide system of secret prisons holding alleged terrorists, including citizens of the US. Moreover, we know there has been an official program of rendition, through which at least one Canadian citizen has been detained, covertly transported to a Syrian prison to be tortured and held indefinitely. Bush who at one time stated that Americans do not torture has since sought legal sanction for the prison system and its interrogation methods. Since 2001, torture has been reframed from a thing that no free country would engage in, where the horror of the crime helped legitimize the case for invading Iraq, to something that is deemed necessary in the fight to protect American values.

The scorching irony here is that torture remains entirely at odds with the principles of a liberal democracy. The degradation of torture is deeply at odds with the principle of equality. Those tortured are universally suspects who have not been proven guilty of a crime in a court of law, which violates habeas corpus, the rule of law, and, of course, the principle of liberty. The case that torture is useful for extracting vital information has long been proven false (Holmes, 2001: 121). And with respect to the ticking time-bomb scenario that is often invoked, where authorities have captured a terrorist who they are certain has already set a bomb that has yet to explode, it is virtually inconceivable that this scenario could ever occur. As such, it is irrelevant as a justification for implementing a torture policy (Luban, 2001: 45-6). The greatest value of torture to those in power is to intimidate those not currently being tortured. The knowledge that the state is willing to exact so heavy a toll for the mere suspicion that one is aiding terrorists is sufficient to tame the citizenry and silence open dissent. In other words, torture is a useful means to terrorize people into submission (Luban, 2006: 40). It is the perfect reversal of the stated goal of a war of freedom against fear.

Bush's secret prisons and torture program have been in the works at least since 2002. As the *Globe* covered the Abu Ghraib story in 2004, giving the president the benefit of the doubt, the program was well under way. When Bush stated he would not

condone torture, he lied. Those who were able to interpret the story in terms of its larger context, beyond the frame of the war on terror, realized this and covered it in far starker terms. For instance, Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker* wrote on May 24, 2004:

The Pentagon's operation, known inside the intelligence community by several code words, including Copper Green, encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq. A senior C.I.A. official, in confirming the details of this account last week, said that the operation stemmed from Rumsfeld's long-standing desire to wrest control of America's clandestine and paramilitary operations from the C.I.A.

Similar stories were available elsewhere, though they were not the standard. Why did "Canada's national newspaper" keep its readers in the dark about how far the Bush administration had strayed from the values and laws it pledged to uphold? It is undoubtedly significant to Canadians, as we are being asked to cooperate in the war on terror, work with US security personnel, build a North American security network, fight along side the US in Afghanistan, not to mention endure having our citizens kidnapped and shipped to a Syrian prison. It is important to be able to distinguish whether their goals are truly our goals. If the war on terror is in fact a war on freedom, this is a matter of which Canadians should be aware.

Other related stories that the *Globe* missed entirely include the possibility that the 2004 presidential election was fraudulent and the Military Commissions Act, which suspends *habeas corpus* within the US for those the president suspects of being enemy combatants. When interviewed, Northfield offered a few possible explanations for the nature of their coverage. For the first, he dismissed as a matter "no one" believes, and he had not heard of the second. When asked in the follow up question about Representative John Conyer's report released in May 2005, *What Went Wrong In Ohio: The Conyers Report On The 2004 Presidential Election*, Northfield confessed that he had not heard of it.

Perhaps the implied astonishment at the *Globe's* coverage stems from exaggerated expectations of its role. After a year of following the paper, Noam Chomsky concluded, "reading the *Globe* and *Mail* is like reading the *Boston Globe* – its like an ordinary, quality local newspaper in the US: small amount of international coverage, huge amounts of business news, and mostly picking stories off sources in the US" (Chomsky, 2002: 289). The *Globe* has three permanent reporters in the Washington bureau, making it the paper's largest foreign bureau. One is devoted to financial and economic reporting for the *Report on Business*, a second, Paul Koring, covers security and defence, while John Ibbitson has recently been appointed to cover politics.¹ Thus *Globe* readers must rely on

¹ Sending John Ibbitson to Washington indicates that the *Globe* is not concerned about their track record with respect to the issues addressed in this essay. For the year following the September 11 attacks, Ibbitson's coverage of US politics reads like a series of US government press releases about the new dangers of terrorism and the progress of the nascent mission in Afghanistan. In his editorials he conveyed a discomfort with some of the changes, but ultimately accepting new restrictions on our liberty as a necessary evil. See for instance his editorial on Maher Arar suggesting that he believes and inquiry ill-

one person's interpretation of politics in Washington. Can we count on John Ibbitson to do the research and provide the analysis to get at the heart of the political machinations of Washington?

The dearth of resources the paper can allocate to the subject, the need to meet pressing deadlines and hence too pressed for research and deep analysis, the standard compulsion of journalists to rely on authority figures for quotes and stories, the reality that journalists are rarely experts in the subjects they cover, and the tendency to defer to the larger US papers on matters of US politics all factor into explain why Chomsky's assessment is correct: the *Globe* is a quality local paper. It cannot be expected to question the *status quo* in foreign affairs coverage. We cannot ask it to think beyond the framing of foreign powers.

Democracies must have a citizenry that is sufficiently informed to make the best possible decisions about who to elect and how to influence those in office. As the long established medium for providing information about events, policies and legislation that affects the public interest, and conveying the public's views and moods to the decision makers, newspapers act as a check on the political, religious, and economic elite. Newspapers along with other news media play a key role in defining what is acceptable, and what use of power is legitimate, and has thereby become a power in itself, and thus earned its classification as the Fourth Estate. By failing to recognize that Bush's war on terror was the direct inverse of what Bush claimed, *The Globe and Mail* surrendered its power as a defender of the public interests. While the fault is more a matter of circumstance than ill will or incompetence, the outcome is the same. The readers of Canada's preeminent national paper were left in the dark at a critical period in global politics.

advised and that occasional lapses in civil liberties may be unavoidable to protect our security (November 7, 2003).

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