

Can't Win the War? Bomb the Press!

By FRANK RICH
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OLD GLORY lost today," Bill Frist declaimed last week when his second attempt to rewrite the Constitution in a single month went the way of his happy prognosis for Terri Schiavo. Of course it isn't Old Glory that lost when the flag-burning amendment flamed out. The flag always survives the politicians who wrap themselves in it. What really provoked Mr. Frist's crocodile tears was the foiling of yet another ruse to distract Americans from the wreckage in Iraq. He and his party, eager to change the subject in an election year, just can't let go of their scapegoat strategy. It's illegal Hispanic immigrants, gay couples seeking marital rights, cut-and-run Democrats and rampaging flag burners who have betrayed America's values, not those who bungled a war.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Frank Rich.

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No sooner were the flag burners hustled offstage than a new traitor was unveiled for the Fourth: the press. Public enemy No. 1 is The New York Times, which was accused of a "disgraceful" compromise of national security (by President Bush) and treason (by Representative Peter King of New York and the Coulter amen chorus). The Times's offense was to publish a front-page article about a comprehensive American effort to track terrorists with the aid of a Belgian consortium, Swift, which serves as a clearinghouse for some 7,800 financial institutions in 200 countries.

It was a solid piece of journalism. But if you want to learn the truly dirty secrets of how our government prosecutes this war, the story of how it vilified The Times is more damning than anything in the article that caused the uproar.

The history of that scapegoating begins on the Friday morning, June 23, that The Times, The Los Angeles Times

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and The Wall Street Journal all published accounts of the Swift program first posted on the Web the night before. In his press briefing that morning, Tony Snow fielded many questions about the program's legality. But revealingly, for all his opportunities, he never attacked the news media.

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Barry Blitt

Far from Swift-boating the Swift reportage, he offered tentative praise. "It's interesting," he said, "because I think there's a fair amount of balance in the story in that you do have concrete benefits and you do have the kind of abstract harms that were mentioned in there." He noted that there had been "no allegation of illegality" in the Times article.

This was accurate. The story was balanced, just as Mr. Snow said. And it was no cause for a national-security alarm for the simple reason that since 9/11, our government has repeatedly advertised that it is following the terrorists' money trail, a tactic enhanced by the broad new powers over financial institutions that Mr. Bush sought and received. In November 2002, he and the Treasury secretary at the time, Paul O'Neill, even held a televised event promoting their Foreign Terrorist Asset Tracking Center, established expressly, in the president's words, to "investigate the

financial infrastructure of the international terrorist networks." As for Swift, [Dan Froomkin of washingtonpost.com](#) points out that it can't resist bragging on its own Web site that it "has a history of cooperating in good faith with authorities," including treasury departments and law enforcement agencies, in trying "to combat abuse of the financial system for illegal activities."

Only a terrorist who couldn't shoot straight would assume that [Swift was not part of the American effort to stalk terrorist transactions](#); that's tantamount to assuming that cops would track down license plate numbers without enlisting the Department of Motor Vehicles. But, unfortunately for us, terrorists are not so stupid: [it's been reported as far back as 2003 \(in The Washington Post\)](#) and as recently as this month (in Ron Suskind's must-read best seller, "The One Percent Doctrine") that our enemies long ago took Mr. Bush at his word and abandoned banks for couriers, money brokers, front companies and suitcases stuffed with cash and gold. Tom Brokaw summarized the consensus of terrorism experts last week when he told Chris Matthews of MSNBC: "I don't know anyone who believes that the terrorist network said, 'Oh my God, they're tracing our financial transactions? What a surprise.' Of course, they knew that they were doing that."

The real news conveyed by The Times and its competitors was not the huge program to track terrorist finances, but that per usual from the administration that gave us Gitmo, the program was conducted with little oversight from the other two branches of government. Even so, the reporting on the pros and cons of that approach was, as Mr. Snow said, balanced.

Or so he said Friday morning, June 23. By Monday, the president had entered the fray and Mr. Snow was accusing The Times of putting the "public's right to know" over "somebody's right to live." What had happened over the weekend to prompt this escalation of hysteria? The same stuff that always happens when the White House scapegoats the press (or anyone else): bad and embarrassing news that the White House wants to drown out.

One such looming embarrassment was that breathless arrest in Miami of what federal authorities billed as a "homegrown terrorist cell." This amazing feat of derring-do had all the melodramatic trappings of a carefully staged administration P.R. extravaganza. On June 22, the F.B.I. director, Robert Mueller, just happened to be on "Larry King Live" speaking about his concerns about "homegrown terrorists" when, by a remarkable coincidence, Larry King announced a "report just in" from a Miami station on a federal terrorism investigation. The next day — the same day the Swift story was published — brought the full-dress dog-and-pony show by the intrepid attorney general, Alberto Gonzales.

1 | 2 [NEXT PAGE »](#)

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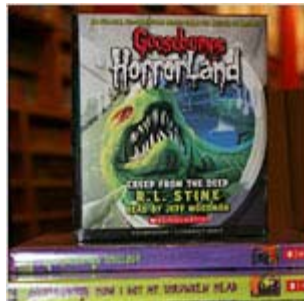
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