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What a gift: Bush team exploits magazine's gaffe

Robert Jensen & Pat Youngblood (Op-Ed)
Philadelphia Inquirer
May 18, 2005

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If there is a political playbook for right-wing conservatives these days, it no doubt begins, "Step No. 1: Whenever possible, blame the news media."

What to do if the U.S. invasions/occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have sparked resistance in those countries because people don't like being occupied by a foreign power interested in exploiting their resources or geopolitical value? Blame journalists.

That's exactly what the Bush administration and its rhetorical attack dogs are doing with the "scandal" over Newsweek's story on the desecration of the Koran at the U.S. prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

In its May 9 issue, Newsweek reported that U.S. military investigators had found evidence that U.S. guards had flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet to provoke prisoners. This week, the magazine retracted, saying not that editors knew for sure that such an incident didn't happen but that "based on what we know now, we are retracting our original story that an internal military investigation had uncovered Quran abuse at Guantánamo Bay."

After the story ran, Afghan and U.S. forces fired on demonstrators in Afghanistan, killing at least 15 and injuring many others. The mantra emerged quickly: Newsweek got it wrong, and Newsweek is to blame for the deaths. The first conclusion is premature, the second wrong.

First, it's not clear whether U.S. guards in Guantánamo or other prisons have abused copies of the Koran. Detainees have made such claims, as reported by attorneys for some of the men in custody (and denied by U.S. officials). Newsweek's retraction is ambiguous, suggesting they believe the incident may have happened, but no longer can demonstrate that it was cited in the specific U.S. government documents originally reported.

Given the abuse and torture in various U.S. military prison facilities, it's not hard to believe the Koran stories. Until we have more information, definite conclusions are impossible.

On many a right-wing Web site, though, you'll find the verdict Bush supporters are trying to make the final word: "Newsweek lied, people died."

Yes, people died during demonstrations, and political leaders in the Muslim world have cited the Koran stories to spark anti-U.S. feeling. But these demonstrations have not been spontaneous but were well organized, often by groups of students. The frustration with U.S. policy that fuels these demonstrations isn't limited to the Koran incident, and to reduce the unrest to one magazine story is misleading. Indeed, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at a news conference last week that Army Gen. Carl Eichenberry, senior commander in Afghanistan, reported that the violence "was not at all tied to the article in the magazine."

So, why the focus on the Newsweek story? It's part of the tried-and-true strategy to demonize, disguise and divert: Demonize the news media to disguise the real causes of the resistance and divert attention from failed U.S. policies.

U.S. corporate news media do deserve criticism for coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - not for possibly getting one fact wrong, but for failing to challenge the illegality of both wars and the various distortions the Bush team has used to mobilize support.

We should hold the media accountable when they fail - but defend journalists when they are used by political partisans eager to obscure their own failures.

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