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ETHICS

Newsweek, White House in furor

As the White House asked Newsweek for more than a retraction of an item about treatment of detainees, a politician called the administration hypocritical about 'facts.'

HOWARD KURTZ
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WASHINGTON - The debate over a retracted Newsweek report broadened Tuesday into an argument about media and government ethics, with the White House urging the magazine to help undo the harm to American interests and critics accusing the administration of trying to deflect attention from its own deceptions.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said he welcomed Newsweek's retraction of an item saying military investigators had confirmed that a U.S. interrogator at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had flushed a copy of the Koran down the toilet.

While that was "a good first step," McClellan said, the White House wants Newsweek "to help repair the damage" by explaining "what happened and why they got it wrong, particularly to people in the region." Newsweek "can also talk about policies and practices of the United States military," which "goes out of its way to treat the holy Koran with great care and respect," McClellan said.

Newsweek Editor Mark Whitaker said the magazine had already explained in this week's issue that the military has special guidelines for handling the Koran. He also questioned the administration's sharp rhetoric, saying: "Are they making the story in the Arab street that the administration is trying to silence reporters about these sensitive issues, and is that going to keep the unrest going?"

'ADMINISTRATION LIED'

Rep. Fortney Stark, D-Calif., charged the White House with hypocrisy, saying: "The administration is chastising Newsweek for a story that contained a fact that turned out to be false. This is the same administration that lied to the Congress, the United Nations and the American people by fabricating reasons to send us to war."

Stark added in an interview: "For the administration to be holier than thou about this is somewhere between obscene and funny. There are publications that often expose weaknesses in administration positions and they don't like that. They play tough."

McClellan rejected such criticism in an interview, saying: "We've taken steps to make sure we improve our intelligence gathering. This should not be used as a distraction from what occurred here. It gave an impression of our military that is wrong."

CANCEL SUBSCRIPTIONS

Rep. Deborah Pryce of Ohio, chairman of the House Republican Conference, urged every congressional office to cancel its Newsweek subscription. "Retraction and regrets will not atone for the reckless behavior of an irresponsible reporter and an overzealous publication," she said in a statement.

The Newsweek report triggered protests that turned violent in Afghanistan and other countries, causing at least 16 deaths, although the degree to which the article was responsible remains unclear. Pentagon officials have blamed Newsweek for sparking the violence, but Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that his senior commander in Afghanistan told him the riots were ``not at all tied to the article."