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'Devastating' Bill Moyers Probe of Press and Iraq Coming This Week

By Greg Mitchell

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NEW YORK (Commentary) The most powerful indictment of the news media for falling down in its duties in the run-up to the war in Iraq will appear next Wednesday, a 90-minute PBS broadcast called "Buying the War," which marks the return of "Bill Moyers Journal." E&P was sent a preview DVD and a draft transcript for the program this week.

While much of the evidence of the media's role as cheerleaders for the war presented here is not new, it is skillfully assembled, with many fresh quotes from interviews (with the likes of Tim Russert and Walter Pincus) along with numerous embarrassing examples of past statements by journalists and pundits that proved grossly misleading or wrong. Several prominent media figures, prodded by Moyers, admit the media failed miserably, though few take personal responsibility.

The war continues today, now in its fifth year, with the death toll for Americans and Iraqis rising again -- yet Moyers points out, "the press has yet to come to terms with its role in enabling the Bush Administration to go to war on false pretenses."

Among the few heroes of this devastating film are reporters with the Knight Ridder/McClatchy bureau in D.C. Tragically late, Walter Isaacson, who headed CNN, observes, "The people at Knight Ridder were calling the colonels and the lieutenants and the people in the CIA and finding out, you know, that the intelligence is not very good. We should've all been doing that."

At the close, Moyers mentions some of the chief proponents of the war who refused to speak to him for this program, including Thomas Friedman, Bill Kristol, Roger Ailes, Charles Krauthammer, Judith Miller, and William Safire.

But Dan Rather, the former CBS anchor, admits, "I don't think there is any excuse for, you know, my performance and the performance of the press in general in the roll up to the war... We didn't dig enough. And we shouldn't have been fooled in this way." Bob Simon, who had strong doubts about evidence for war, was asked by Moyers if he pushed any

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of the top brass at CBS to "dig deeper," and he replies, "No, in all honesty, with a thousand mea culpas....nope, I don't think we followed up on this."

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Instead he covered the marketing of the war in a "softer" way, explaining to Moyers: "I think we all felt from the beginning that to deal with a subject as explosive as this, we should keep it, in a way, almost light – if that doesn't seem ridiculous."

Moyers replies: "Going to war, almost light."

Walter Isaacson is pushed hard by Moyers and finally admits, "We didn't question our sources enough." But why? Isaacson notes there was "almost a patriotism police" after 9/11 and when the network showed civilian casualties it would get phone calls from advertisers and the administration and "big people in corporations were calling up and saying, 'You're being anti-American here.'"

Moyers then mentions that Isaacson had sent a memo to staff, leaked to the Washington Post, in which he declared, "It seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan" and ordered them to balance any such images with reminders of 9/11. Moyers also asserts that editors at the Panama City (Fla.) News-Herald received an order from above, "Do not use photos on Page 1A showing civilian casualties. Our sister paper has done so and received hundreds and hundreds of threatening emails."

Walter Pincus of the Washington Post explains that even at his paper reporters "do worry about sort of getting out ahead of something." But Moyers gives credit to Charles J. Hanley of The Associated Press for trying, in vain, to draw more attention to United Nations inspectors failing to find WMD in early 2003.

The disgraceful press reaction to Colin Powell's presentation at the United Nations seems like something out of Monty Python, with one key British report cited by Powell being nothing more than a student's thesis, downloaded from the Web -- with the student later threatening to charge U.S. officials with "plagiarism."

Phil Donahue recalls that he was told he could not feature war dissenters alone on his MSNBC talk show and always had to have "two conservatives for every liberal." Moyers resurrects a leaked NBC memo about Donahue's firing that claimed he "presents a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war. At the same time our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity."

Moyers also throws some stats around: In the year before the invasion William Safire (who predicted a "quick war" with Iraqis cheering their liberators) wrote "a total of 27 opinion pieces fanning the sparks of war." The Washington Post carried at least 140 front-page stories in that same period making the administration's case for attack. In the six months leading to the invasion the Post would "editorialize in favor of the war at least 27 times."

Of the 414 Iraq stories broadcast on NBC, ABC and CBS nightly news in the six months before the war, almost all could be traced back to sources solely in the White House, Pentagon or State Dept., Moyers tells Russert, who offers no coherent reply.

The program closes on a sad note, with Moyers pointing out that "so many of the advocates and apologists for the war are still flourishing in the media." He then runs a pre-war clip of President Bush declaring, "We cannot wait for the final proof: the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud." Then he explains: "The man who came up with it was Michael Gerson, President Bush's top speechwriter.

"He has left the White House and has been hired by the Washington Post as a columnist."

Greg Mitchell's most recent column on Iraq: "[Sorry We Shot Your Kid, But Here's \\$500](#)"

Greg Mitchell (gmitchell@editorandpublisher.com) is editor and author of seven books on politics and history, including two for Random House, "The Campaign of the Century" and "Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady."

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