

NYT: ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO AUTHORITATIVELY QUASH

There are a couple of funny things about NYT's public editor Arthur Brisbane's article approving the NYT's decision to sit on news of Raymond Davis' CIA affiliation. Check out whom he consults for guidelines on what the NYT should or shouldn't publish.

Bob Woodward, who wrote about secret operations in Pakistan in his recent book "Obama's Wars," described for me the competing priorities in play in this situation. On one hand, he said, the Davis affair is just the "tip of the iceberg" of intensive secret warfare the United States is waging in the region. "I think the aggressive nature of the way all that is covered is good because you are only seeing part of the activity, " said Mr. Woodward, who also is associate editor of The Washington Post.

"But you just don't want to get someone killed," he added. "I learned a long time ago, humanitarian considerations first, journalism second." [my emphasis]

If you're asking Woodward—the guy who withholds **everything** until he can package it into a semi-official narrative, the guy whose reporting is **all** officially sanctioned at this point—whether to withhold news or not, you might as well be asking State Department spokesperson PJ Crowley himself for guidelines.

They're both government flacks, after all.

But what I find really amusing is the logic that went into NYT's decision to withhold Davis'

affiliation. Brisbane reveals the content of Crowley's call to Keller.

Mr. Davis was charged with murder after shooting two Pakistani men in Lahore on Jan. 27. The Times jumped on the story, but on Feb. 8, the State Department spokesman, P.J. Crowley, contacted the executive editor, Bill Keller, with a request. "He was asking us not to speculate, or to recycle charges in the Pakistani press," Mr. Keller said. "His concern was that the letters C-I-A in an article in the NYT, even as speculation, would be taken as authoritative and would be a red flag in Pakistan."

In other words, Crowley called Keller and told him that if the NYT published what newspapers in Pakistan were already publishing, it would be regarded as "authoritative."

Note, NYT's crack public editor didn't bother to explain **who** would regard it as authoritative. Nor did he explain how that would add to the considerable danger to Davis' life. Crowley apparently just said someone might die, and the NYT decided not to report without, apparently, thinking through the logical problem with Crowley's claim (though if they were so worried about people dying, maybe they shouldn't have ginned up a war against Iraq?).

Now, I fully acknowledge that a great number of people here in the US have ignored the last decade of the NYT's coverage and thus still regard it as "authoritative."

But those people are here in the US.

Furthermore, an entire group of people who pose a threat to Davis—the people protesting—would only even see the NYT article if they happen to have InterToobz access and reasonably good English. (And it doesn't matter anyway, given that they already fully believed Davis was CIA or Blackwater. Hell, many of them probably believe the NYT is CIA too.)

The other people who pose a threat to Davis—his jailers—already had all the confirmation they needed he was a spook in the equipment he had when they arrested him.

So basically, Crowley's request represented a big handjob to the NYT's inflated self of its own "authoritativeness," and because the NYT found it credible or at least flattering that their alleged authoritativeness would endanger Davis in a way that all the reporting in Pakistan didn't already, they withheld publication.

After that handjob, as Brisbane describes, they were helpless.

But The Times was stuck with trying to [tell the Davis story without revealing his affiliation].

It's just a short step from that sense of self-enforced helplessness to the line Dean Baquet gives to describe the NYT reporting on this story (though it could describe all of their reporting):

we tried our best not to be misleading.

The Gray Lady. All the News that's Fit to Quash. We try our best not to be misleading.

All of which is totally consistent with the following sentence, which I find astonishing even for the NYT:

I'd call this a no-win situation, one that reflects the limits of responsible journalism in the theater of secret war.

BREAKING NEWS! We have a secret war in Pakistan! One not declared by Congress. And the NYT mentions it, as if that—the secret war we're waging with contractors to avoid all the laws prohibiting secret undeclared wars—is just something a newspaper has to accept.

A secret war is not just irresponsible. It is

illegal.

But rather than actually report **that**, that the US is engaged in an illegal war, the NYT prefers to self-censor its “authoritative” coverage all in the interest of finding a “responsible” way to be journalists faced with evidence of a secret war.