

OMBUD DISTRESS

Everyone's in a big tizzy about OmbudAndy's capitulation to the New Black Panther Party scandal machine in his column this weekend.

Thursday's Post reported about a growing controversy over the Justice Department's decision to scale down a voter-intimidation case against members of the New Black Panther Party. The story succinctly summarized the issues but left many readers with a question: What took you so long?

For months, readers have contacted the ombudsman wondering why The Post hasn't been covering the case. The calls increased recently after competitors such as the New York Times and the Associated Press wrote stories. Fox News and right-wing bloggers have been pumping the story. Liberal bloggers have countered, accusing them of trying to manufacture a scandal.

But The Post has been virtually silent.

[snip]

The Post should never base coverage decisions on ideology, nor should it feel obligated to order stories simply because of blogosphere chatter from the right or the left.

But in this case, coverage is justified because it's a controversy that screams for clarity that The Post should provide. If Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. and his department are not colorblind in enforcing civil rights laws, they should be nailed. If the Commission on Civil Rights' investigation is purely partisan, that should be revealed. If Adams is pursuing a right-wing agenda, he should be exposed.

National Editor Kevin Merida, who termed the controversy “significant,” said he wished The Post had written about it sooner. The delay was a result of limited staffing and a heavy volume of other news on the Justice Department beat, he said.

Better late than never. There’s plenty left to explore.

Perhaps the best of many judicious rants about this capitulation comes from Joan Walsh:

The always smart Adam Serwer, writing for the American Prospect, called Friday “The Day The Controversy Over The New Black Panther Case Fell Apart.” He credited Politico’s interview with conservative Civil Rights Commission vice chair Abigail Thernstrom, who says her GOP commission colleagues and the right-wing media have tried to use the “small potatoes” story of alleged voter intimidation by the “New Black Panther Party” to “topple” the Obama administration, as well as other developments undermining the claims of former Justice Department attorney J. Christian Adams, the main right-winger hyping this case in the right-wing media, particularly Fox News and the Washington Times.

But right on time, Washington Post ombudsman Andrew Alexander chimes in to keep the specious story alive, chiding his paper for ignoring it while valiant journalists like Fox’s Megyn Kelly, Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh fought to bring light to the darkness.

[snip]

It’s the job of editors at big papers like the Post to expose those lies, and the movement behind them – not to flagellate themselves for not saying

"How high?" when right-wing media watchdogs say "Jump!" Andrew Alexander botched his job today.

Thing is, it's not just that OmbudAndy is not doing his job. Nor is it the odd way he seems to be channeling his predecessor, Debbie Howell, in her most craven days.

It's the way this capitulation almost exactly mirrors that of WaPo's rival this March, when NYT's Clark Hoyt published a similar mea culpa about not covering the manufactured scandal about ACORN.

THE Times reported Saturday that Acorn, once considered the nation's largest community organizing group for the poor and powerless, is on the verge of filing for bankruptcy. It has already ceased operating in many states, including Maryland, where two conservative activists pretending to be a pimp and a prostitute used a hidden camera and recorded Acorn employees advising them on how to conceal the source of illegal income and manage 14-year-old Salvadoran prostitutes in the country illegally: "Train them to keep their mouth shut."

The Times was slow last fall to cover that sting in Baltimore, similar ones at Acorn offices in Brooklyn, Washington and other cities, and the resulting uproar, including criminal investigations and votes in Congress to cut off funds for the group. But the paper finally described how a succession of Acorn employees had advised the pair on obviously improper activities and how, as a result, many of the group's allies had deserted it. Now Acorn and its supporters say The Times got the story wrong and, by failing to correct it, has played into the hands of a campaign that has pushed the group near extinction.

Both apologized for the correct reporting their journalists had done the previous year. Both appeared to bow to sheer volume of calls rather than a real assessment of evidence. And both promised—at a moment when any doubt the right wing scandal machine was simply blowing hot air—to make amends for not sufficiently doing what the scandal mongers expected.

(And in doing both, it should be said, made their papers the vehicle of racist fear-mongering.)

This is not just individual ombuds having a bad day discerning facts from right wing scandal-mongering. It is becoming institutional, such that our leading newspapers' idea of policing their own content is simply capitulating to the right wing every time their scandals prove to be completely discredited.