

Gray Lady Down

What the Decline and Fall of the New York Times Means for America

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Chapter Three: Bullets over Arthur Jr.

Abe Rosenthal's funeral in 2006 became an occasion for nostalgia over the death of the *Times*' golden days, a recessional for the paper's transition from the voice of America to an increasingly self-righteous, and politically correct, left-liberal publication. It also became a moment for pause when the effects of young Arthur's fifteen-year reign could be evaluated.

It was not a pretty picture. In a relatively few years, a paper that had been known as the gold standard of American journalism had been tarnished by a string of embarrassing incidents, casting it in the harshest of spotlights, putting its credibility and even its patriotism on the line. Its newsroom had been accused of hypocrisy, corruption, ineptitude, ethical misconduct, fraud, plagiarism, credulosity and, most seriously, ideological bias. The business side was equally under siege, and its board—stacked with Sulzbergers—had presided over a plummeting of stock value to half what it had been in 2002, with advertising revenues in free fall. This steady parade of embarrassing lowlights, where the *Times* had become the focus of the news instead of merely the bearer of it, had revealed cracks in its foundations and made it a target for public anger and derision—as well as a possible candidate for a corporate takeover.

Every time one of these incidents occurred, the *Times* and its partisan defenders—led by Arthur Jr. himself—had tried to depict it as an isolated case, refusing to acknowledge any pattern. But in aggregate these regularly occurring scandals and other expressions of journalistic dysfunction paint a damning portrait of an institution stumbling through chaos of its own making. As *Vanity Fair*'s Michael Wolff would write in May 2008, "The ever growing list of its own journalistic missteps, blunders, and offenses threatens to become one of the things the *Times* most stands for: putting its foot in it. And the expectation, both within the *Times* and among those who obsessively watch it, is that there is always some further black eye, calumny, screw-up, or remarkable instance of tone-deafness on the horizon."

The list of major stumbles on the *Times*' downward path reads like a bill of particulars against the Sulzberger Jr. years, a chronicle of decline unparalleled in modern American media history.

The Blair Affair—It began in the spring of 2003 with revelations that one of the paper's rising African American reporters, Jayson Blair, had plagiarized and fabricated material in scores of articles over a four-year period, including such high-profile stories as the Washington D.C. sniper case in 2002, and U.S. casualties from the first months of the Iraq War in 2003. It ended when Arthur Sulzberger Jr., who had pledged in the pages of his own paper that there would be no newsroom scapegoats, fired his close friend and handpicked executive editor, Howell Raines, as well as the managing editor,

Gerald Boyd, the highest-ranking black ever in the newsroom. Facing a staff rebellion, public humiliation and a charge of bureaucratic disarray, Sulzberger admitted that the plagiarism scandal was “the low point in the paper’s 150 year history.”

The depressing story was told in the *Times*’ own 14,000-word reconstruction of the Blair fiasco, headlined “Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception.” This inquiry declared that Blair had “violated the cardinal tenet of journalism, which is simply truth.” It said that 36 of 73 articles Blair had written since he started to get national reporting assignments in October of the previous year had serious problems. Blair, who had been at the *Times* for almost five years and had racked up an inordinate record of “corrections,” had used his cell phone, his laptop and access to databases, particularly photo databases, to “blur his true whereabouts” as he “fabricated comments,” “concocted scenes,” “lifted details from other newspapers and worse services” and “selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen something” in order to write falsely about some of the most “emotionally charged moments in recent history.” While Blair created the impression he was emailing his editors from the field, on key stories he was sending these transmissions from his Brooklyn apartment or from another floor in the *Times* building. The report admitted that one of Blair’s biggest “scoops” on the D.C. sniper case, which involved a local police station confession by John Allen Muhammad that was allegedly cut short by turf-conscious U.S. attorneys, had five anonymous sources—all fake. Law-enforcement beat reporters in the Washington bureau had complained, but were ignored.

Touching on the combustible issue of racial preferences as a factor in Blair’s rise, the report explained that he had joined the *Times* through a minority-only internship and then was promoted to full-time reporter in January 2001, and that his immediate supervisor, Jonathan Landman, the Metro editor, objected but ultimately deferred to the paper’s “commitment to diversity.” Landman did warn his higher-ups that editors had to “stop Jayson from writing for the Times,” but that memo had little effect.

Although the *Times* denied any connection between Blair and the broader issue of affirmative action, such a conclusion was hard to get around. The recently retired *Times* columnist William Safire said, “Apparently, this 27-year-old was given too many second chances by editors eager for this ambitious black journalist to succeed.”

As part of its lacerating self-inquiry, the paper held a special off-site “town meeting” of newsroom employees to address the worsening staff morale and many still-unanswered questions. Hundreds of *Times* newsroom personnel filed down the sidewalk into a rented Broadway movie theater in what one tabloid reporter standing next to me on-scene called “the world’s longest perp walk.” Nearby, a prankster costumed as “Baghdad Bob,” the infamously prevaricating former spokesman for the Iraqi Ministry of Information, held up a sign that said “New York Times Reporter: Will Lie for Food.” The meeting, which Raines would later call “a disaster,” began with an odd statement from Arthur Jr.: “If we had done this [handling the Blair fiasco] right, we would not be here today. We didn’t do this right. We regret that deeply. It sucks.” From here, the meeting quickly degenerated into tense, angry, profanity-laced accusations. Raines and his deputies, one editor charged, had lost “the confidence of much of the newsroom.” To the surprise of many, Raines admitted that Blair had been a beneficiary of racial favoritism. “Where I come from, when it comes to principles on race, you have to pick a ditch to die in,” Raines intoned in his best Southern drawl. “And let it come rough or

smooth, you'll find me in the trenches for justice. Does that mean I personally favored Jayson? Not consciously," he continued. "But you have a right to ask if I, as a white man from Alabama with those convictions, gave him one chance too many by not stopping his appointment to the sniper team. When I look into my heart for the truth of that, the answer is yes." Raines also said he had no intention of stepping down voluntarily. To which Sulzberger chimed, "If he were to offer his resignation, I would not accept it." Sulzberger's tone-deafness and the vote of confidence in Raines left many staffers deflated. One *Times* reporter told *New York* magazine that the meeting "only served to make the scandal—and the mockery—to build." Even late-night comedians like Letterman and Leno got into the act. The old slogan at the *Times*, "All the news that's fit to print," had just been replaced by a new one, Letterman declared: "We make it up." As it unfolded, the scandal sorely tested the friendship and ideological affinity between Raines and Sulzberger, as well as Sulzberger's public pledge that there would be no newsroom scapegoats. The day after members of the influential Washington bureau convinced him that the paper would never recover until the two top editors left, Sulzberger stood in the newsroom and announced that Raines and Boyd would step down. He implied that the departures were voluntary, saying he wanted to "applaud Howell and Gerald for putting the interest of this newspaper, a newspaper we all love, above their own." In an interview afterward, Sulzberger emphasized that he had not been pressured to fire them, either by the board or by family shareholders. (Within months, Raines would go on television flatly contradicting Sulzberger; according to Raines, after returning from D.C. that day Sulzberger had told him "there was too much blood on the floor" for him to remain.) The headline on the page-one *Times* story said only: "Times's 2 Top Editors Resign After Furor on Writer's Fraud." Like much of what Jayson Blair wrote, the headline that closed the scandalous circle was a lie.

Sulzberger's Ill-Considered Public Utterances—The countercultural values that Sulzberger likes to flaunt generated notable controversy when he gave a commencement speech at the State University of New York at New Paltz in May 2006. Coming so shortly after Rosenthal's death and the weeklong celebration of his journalistic values—especially his dedication to keeping the paper "straight"—Sulzberger's speech attracted wide attention, and was featured on talk radio and cable news across the nation. The core of the speech was a generational expression of guilt over the horrible condition of the world that the graduates would be entering. When he was a student, Sulzberger said, only slightly tongue in cheek, young people had helped end the war and forced Nixon's resignation. "We entered the real world committed to making it a better, safer, cleaner, more equal place. We were determined not to repeat the mistakes of our predecessors. We had seen the horrors and futility of war and smelled the stench of corruption in government. Our children, we vowed, would never know that," Sulzberger said. "So, well, sorry. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

Critics found the speech a risible compendium of 1960s romanticism, generational vanity and self-conferred moral superiority. It reflected a misunderstood conflation of interest-group politics—illegal aliens, gays, abortion—with "fundamental rights." Citing the speech's defeatism and gloom, the conservative radio host Laura Ingraham summarized much of the media reaction when she declared Sulzberger "the most negative media figure" in the country, "the Grim Reaper of American Journalism." In Sulzberger's worldview, she said, "it's not 'Morning in America,' it's evening and there's no end in sight."

Weapons of Mass Destruction—Judith Miller's erroneous reporting on Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction led many, especially on the left, to charge that the *Times* had become a propaganda conduit for the Bush administration. Miller was close to the administration both professionally and personally. She was also close to the Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, who turned out to be unreliable on many fronts.

According to columnist/blogger Arianna Huffington, Miller and others in the media who followed her lead were guilty of “selling a war to the American public based on lies.” Some of Miller's reporting, even some of her wording, was used by administration officials as they made the prewar rounds on the Sunday talk shows to warn about “mushroom clouds” appearing on the horizon. When no WMDs were found in Iraq, the *Times* conducted a postmortem, combing through Miller's reporting; this resulted in mortifying *mea culpas* in both a special “editor's note” and an editorial admitting that the paper had been “taken in.”

Plamegate—The *Times* got its fingers broken again in another fiasco involving Judith Miller. In this instance, the issue was the leaking of a covert CIA operative's name, Valerie Plame, to the media. Allegedly this was done by high-ranking officials in the Bush White House in retaliation against Plame's husband, Joseph Wilson, the former ambassador who had disparaged the administration's claim that Saddam Hussein tried to buy yellowcake uranium in Niger. The *Times* initially editorialized fiercely for a special prosecutor, but quickly changed its tune when that prosecutor, Patrick Fitzgerald, sent a subpoena to Miller. Invoking journalistic confidentiality, Miller refused to name the source who had “outed” Plame to her, and she defied Fitzgerald's grand jury subpoena, a jailable offense, even though she had written nothing about the case.

Miller's case became a *cause célèbre* throughout journalism. To Sulzberger, it was a moral crusade, as he took to the airwaves and had “Free Judy” buttons printed up. After losing in protracted court proceedings, Miller finally went to jail, but after eighty-eight days there decided to testify. When she named Lewis “Scooter” Libby as her source, many believed that she might have been invoking journalistic privilege to protect someone in the White House who had committed a crime or had been engaged in a vengeance-driven smear campaign against Joe Wilson.

Its credibility once again under attack, *Times* editors commissioned yet another internal inquiry, and produced a long take-out in late October 2005, which unfortunately for the *Times* had the same effect as their infamous postmortem on Jayson Blair. It painted an unflattering picture of its own reporter, who had agreed to identify Libby as a “former Hill staffer” to hide his fingerprints on the leak, had “forgotten” a meeting with Libby as well as the notes she took during that meeting, and had written Plame's name in her notebook as “Valerie Flame.” As the *New York Observer* characterized the accounts, they told “a tale of a dysfunctional staffer running loose at a dysfunctional institution, with historic consequences.”

Within a week of her release, Miller went from being a *Times* hero to a pariah. The editor, Bill Keller, the public editor, Byron Calame, and columnist Maureen Dowd all took aim, making it clear that Miller would never return to the *Times* newsroom. Miller soon engineered a graceful, lucrative exit and announced her “retirement” from the paper, saying, “Arthur was there for me—until he wasn't.” As Gay Talese, a former *Times* reporter, said to the *New Yorker* in reference to Sulzberger Jr.'s handling of Plamegate, “You get a bad king every once in a while.”

NSA Wiretapping—The paper was thrust into a defensive position once again by a December 2005 story about the National Security Agency’s warrantless and possibly illegal wiretapping of international communications between people on U.S. soil and people abroad who were suspected of ties to terrorism. The sources for the story, by the Washington bureau reporters James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, were “nearly a dozen current and former officials, who were granted anonymity because of the classified nature of the program.” They had talked to the *Times* “because of their concerns about the operation’s legality and oversight.”

But the NSA story raised the issue of exposing national secrets during wartime. President Bush called the front-page report a “shameful act.” Others accused the *Times* of treason. The story got Washington so steamed it almost scuttled the reauthorization of the USA Patriot Act.

The SWIFT Program—According to the same reporters who broke the NSA story, Risen and Lichtblau, the Bush administration’s Treasury Department had been conducting a top-secret program to monitor financial transactions of known and possible international terrorists. There was nothing illegal about the program, known by the acronym SWIFT, and it was highly effective, resulting in arrests of terrorists and the disrupting of terror plots.

The *Times*’ exposé on SWIFT in June 2006—coming on the heels of the NSA story and a controversial report about secret “renditions” of terror suspects to third-country locations for interrogation—ignited wide condemnation. While some of the fury was partisan, much of it reflected a broad public exasperation with the paper’s repeated efforts to divulge classified national security secrets and hobble counterterrorism efforts.

Radcliffe Rant—In June 2006, less than a month after Sulzberger’s generational apologia at New Paltz, the *Times*’ Supreme Court correspondent, Linda Greenhouse, vented her own ideological preoccupations when she received an award from her alma mater, Harvard’s Radcliffe College. During her remarks in front of eight hundred people, Greenhouse described weeping uncontrollably at a recent Simon and Garfield concert, overwhelmed by the realization that the grand promise of the 1960s generation had been unfulfilled, yielding to the corruption and oppression of the current political moment. She then charged that “our government had turned its energy and attention away from upholding the rule of law and toward creating law-free zones at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, and other places around the world, the U.S. Congress, whatever.” She also attacked “the sustained assault on women’s reproductive freedom and the hijacking of public policy by religious fundamentalism,” adding, “To say that these last years have been dispiriting is an understatement.” Greenhouse also took a potshot at immigration enforcement, saying that she felt “a growing obligation to reach out across the ridiculous” fence about to be built on the Mexican border.

Greenhouse took heat from all over, including *Times* public editors. Byron Calame cited the paper’s ethical guidelines stipulating that reporters and editors who appear on television or radio “should avoid expressing views that go beyond what they would be allowed to say in the paper.” He continued: “Keeping personal opinions out of the public realm is simply one of the obligations for those who remain committed to the importance of impartial news coverage. . . . The merest perception of bias in a reporter’s personal views can plant seeds of doubt that may grow in a reader’s mind to become a major concern about the credibility of the paper.” Daniel Okrent, the former public

editor, said he was amazed by Greenhouse's remarks: "It's been a basic tenet of journalism . . . that the reporter's ideology [has] to be suppressed and submerged, so the reader has absolute confidence that what he or she is reading is not colored by previous views."

Frauds and Hoaxes—In numerous instances, the *Times* has allowed itself to be conned or otherwise used as a vehicle by people who wanted to manipulate or defraud its readers. Some of these mortifying hoaxes reflect the volume and velocity of news in the information age, such that inexperienced editors cannot or do not properly analyze it all for authenticity. But veterans have been conned too, largely because they are submerged in a tide of political correctness: in soft-headed idealism, righteous naiveté, and unconscious double standards resulting from the paper's preoccupation with diversity. The nature of the hoaxes is varied, but most have involved some designated "victim" group—blacks, illegal immigrants, Muslims, the transgendered, military women—as the object of a journalistic sensitivity that often becomes solicitude. In a March 2006 news feature, Nicholas Confessore described the plight of a Hurricane Katrina victim from Biloxi, Mississippi, who had been stranded by bureaucratic ineptitude in a New York City welfare hotel with four of her children and her oldest son's fiancée. Although she called FEMA, the Red Cross and the city welfare office, no assistance was forthcoming. Her health had deteriorated, requiring numerous hospital stays. But in reality, the woman was a con artist. She had never lived in Biloxi, did not have custody of her children, was on probation for a check-forging charge, and was under investigation by the Brooklyn district attorney's office. She was arrested shortly after Confessore's report ran in the paper.

The *Times* has fallen prey to several literary con jobs as well. A 2004 profile of the cult novelist JT LeRoy said the author had been a cross-dressing hooker who was rescued by a bohemian couple in San Francisco and a prominent psychiatrist. In 2006 it was revealed that JT LeRoy was a publicity invention, and the actual novelist was not a man. Then in 2008 there was the case of Margaret B. Jones and a memoir about a life submerged in the world of guns, crack, gang violence and police brutality in South Central Los Angeles, followed by a scholarship and graduation from the University of Oregon. In fact, Margaret B. Jones was really Margaret Seltzer, who had grown up in a Los Angeles suburb and graduated from a top private school, and got her "experience" of the gang and drug culture from conversations with people in coffee shops.

In a report from Iraq, the *Times* got snookered by an Iraqi human rights activist who claimed to be the Abu Ghraib detainee infamously photographed standing on a box with wires attached to his body. In fact, he was not that man, but was using the photo on his business card to whip up anger on a publicity tour of the Arab world. Another hoax related to the Iraq War came in a *Times Magazine* cover story about American servicewomen in Iraq. One of the subjects, a Navy construction worker, claimed to have been raped in Guam while awaiting deployment to Iraq, saying it was the second time she had been raped in the service. She also claimed to be suffering brain damage from an IED in Iraq. In fact, the Navy confirmed that she had never been to Iraq.

Ghosts of Frauds Past—In addition to contemporary hoaxes, there were phantoms of frauds from earlier days, when they were still a rarity, that returned to haunt the *Times*. One of the most egregious involved Walter Duranty, the paper's Moscow correspondent for twelve years who won the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on Stalin's Russia. At the time, the Pulitzer Prize Board said that Duranty's work showed "a profound and

intimate comprehension of conditions in Russia" and was consistent with "the best type of foreign correspondence." His contemporaries in Russia saw differently. According to Malcolm Muggeridge, a British reporter, Durany was "the greatest liar of any journalist I have met in 50 years of journalism." In exchange for access to Stalin and material privileges, his critics said, Durany wrote favorably about Soviet policies of forced collectivization that later resulted in the deaths of millions due to famine in 1932 and 1933. To many, he became known as "Stalin's Apologist."

Durany's Pulitzer had long posed a dilemma for the *Times*, although a portrait of Durany still hung on the eleventh floor 43rd Street building, near the executive dining room. In 1990, an editorial on Durany's apologetics chastised him for "indifference to the catastrophic famine . . . when millions perished in the Ukraine." There was discussion about giving the Pulitzer Prize back, but the *Times* stonewalled.

In 2003, pressure from Ukrainian American groups, who liken their famine to the Holocaust, prompted the Pulitzer Prize Board to open an investigation on rescinding Durany's prize. Arthur Sulzberger hired Mark Von Hagen, a Columbia historian, to perform an independent assessment of Durany's work, expecting validation. Instead, Von Hagen said that Durany's reporting showed a "lack of balance and uncritical acceptance of the Soviet self-justification for its cruel and wasteful regime" that was a "disservice to the American readers of the New York Times." Sulzberger raised hackles when, without explanation, he cautioned that revoking the award was somewhat akin to the Stalinist urge "to airbrush purged figures out of official records and histories." Von Hagen was furious. Such "airbrushing" had been intended to suppress the truth about what was happening under Stalin, he shot back. "The aim of revoking Walter Durany's prize is the opposite: to bring greater awareness of the potential long-term damage that his reporting did for our understanding of the Soviet Union." In the end, the Pulitzer Board voted not to rescind the award. Durany's portrait continued to hang on wall near the executive dining room until the *Times* moved to its new building in 2008.

Arthur Sulzberger Jr.'s Financial Missteps—The price of *Times* stock, which traded at about \$53 a share during the Blair scandal, has dropped through the floor, as have quarterly operating profits and ad revenue, while circulation continues to decline. The paper's bond rating is practically "junk," and a cash flow crisis in 2009 led it to borrow from a Mexican investor at rates considered almost usurious. Wall Street has smelled blood, resulting in an unprecedented shareholder challenge through which one firm, Harbinger Capital, gained two seats on the board of directors.

Meanwhile, there have been company-wide layoffs and, for the first time, newsroom downsizing. Employee stock options and contributions to the Newspaper Guild's health fund have been adversely affected. The size of the paper itself has shrunk, with a 5 percent reduction in the space devoted to news.

The dark financial picture—a product of general newspaper industry dynamics as well as bad business decisions—has certainly not helped Sulzberger's eroded position.

According to a *New Yorker* piece by Ken Auletta in 2006, the publisher had become "a particular source of concern," and in late 2005 a family friend asked, "Is Arthur going to get fired?" A *Times* staffer told *New York* magazine that no one at the paper felt in good hands "because people believe [Sulzberger] is an incredible boob."

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The bottom line? Instead of functioning as an impartial referee in the national conversation about controversial issues, the *New York Times* has become a cheerleader,

an advocate, even a combatant, some critics have argued. Rather than maintain professional detachment and objectivity, the paper has embraced activism. Rather than foster true intellectual and ideological diversity, the paper has become the victim of an insular group-think, turning into a tattered symbol of liberal orthodoxy that is increasingly out of touch. And rather than let the chips fall where they may no matter who is embarrassed or shamed by their reporting, the paper's news sections have been shaded by a fear of offending certain groups and favoritism toward certain causes. Stories that should be done in a timely and responsible manner are often not done at all, or they are done years after news pegs for them have come and gone. Although the paper can be scrupulous about factual corrections, it has shown limited inclination or ability to come to terms with larger mistakes of meaning and interpretation, especially when doing so might transgress a liberal party line or expose its biases.

How precipitously this once-mighty institution has fallen and how deeply compromised its principles have become are questions inextricably entwined with what must now be regarded as the *Times*' ideological commitments: race and "diversity," immigration, homosexuality and gender, the "culture wars," and now, perhaps most crucially, its dismissive attitude toward the War on Terror, including U.S. military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the sixties, Arthur Sulzberger Jr.'s favorite era, it was common to hear that "the personal is political." In the case of the *Times*, it is the personnel that have made for the politicization.