

LAPDOGS by Eric Boehlert

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Preface, p. x The goal of *Lapdogs* is to cut through incessant rhetoric about a liberal media bias, and to show, factually, just how the mainstream media has tipped the scales in President Bush's favor for going on six years. The proof for that is all in the public record; in the voluminous pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, just to name a few, as well as in the mountain of transcripts produced by network and cable news programs. *Lapdogs* simply corrals as much of the information as possible and lays it out in a way I think makes the conclusion—that the press rolled over the Bush—inescapable.

p. 9 The MSM itself is back on its heels, grappling with a changing media landscape where more and more news organizations are owned by fewer entities (which narrows career choices for journalists), while their collective clout is usurped by new online players. The newspaper industry, losing millions of readers each year, is contracting at an unprecedented rate, with deep cutbacks hitting virtually every major newsroom in the country. Meanwhile, television news teams are under intense pressure to turn a profit, which has driven some of the decision-making process into the ground. That's particularly true of the twenty-four-hour cable news channels, where pointless high-speed car chases are occasionally broadcast live under the guise of "breaking news." Widespread economic uncertainty gripping the

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news business means authentic job security has become scarce, which in turn feeds an urge to follow the pack. All of that has added to the Beltway media's tentativeness, on display since 2000.

p. 12 The country needed the press to report aggressively and clearly, to be unafraid of the facts and to be unafraid of being unpopular. Instead, the press ceded to Bush, while at the same time treating his opponents, be it Democrats or antiwar activists, with open disdain. Or, as Daniel Okrent, the former public editor, or ombudsman, of the *New York Times*, described it, "The general rolling over on the part of the American press allowed the war to happen." It's hard to imagine a news media failure more grave than that.

p. 15 "This particular anti-press campaign is not about Journalism 101," wrote *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne. "It is about Power 101. It is a sophisticated effort to demolish the idea of a press independent of political parties by way of discouraging scrutiny of conservative politicians in power." The "new postmodernists" on the right want to "shift attention away from the truth or falsity of specific facts and allegations—and move the discussion to the motives of the journalists and media organizations putting them forward," wrote Dionne. In other words, the goal is to create a news culture where there are few if any agreed upon facts, thereby making serious debate impossible.

p. 129 Tomlinson, who grew up outside the tiny town of Galax, Virginia, in the Blue Ridge Mountains and knew something about small town America, considered the *Now* report to be one-sided and superficial and he decided it was his duty to take action. Right then on that Friday night, as Tomlinson later told the *Washington Post*, he resolved that it was time to bring "balance" to the public airwaves. He quickly sent a letter off to the head of PBS complaining, *Now With Bill Moyers* "does not contain anything approaching the balance the law requires for public broadcasting."

pp. 130-131 Beginning in 2003 and extending over the next two years, Tomlinson, sometimes conferring with top White House aides, including Karl Rove, spent millions of taxpayer dollars getting new conservative-friendly programs on the air, installed the former co-chairman of the Republican National Committee as CPB's president, tapped a Bush ally as head of CPB programming, created an ombudsman's office to police biased reporters, hired consultants to secretly document broadcasting bias, and demanded new journalism guidelines be implemented. All of that because out of the hundreds of hours of public broadcasting programming aired each week *one* program, *Now*, was too liberal. And for that Tomlinson was willing to risk attacking, undermining, and perhaps even crippling, public broadcasting.

The importance of the Tomlinson's smear campaign against public broadcasting was not in how the MSM covered the controversy; they, and particularly the major dailies, did a relatively good job framing the issue and chronicling Tomlinson's heavy-handed crusade and his many inconsistencies. The significance of the showdown, and how it related to the MSM's timid coverage of the Bush administration, was that it presented an unblemished look at how conservatives moved hard to throttle the press, to put reporters on notice, and to discourage them from asking too many hard questions. Tomlinson's meltdown over PBS also highlighted how rampantly dishonest the conservative debate over liberal bias often is how it usually has little if anything to do with journalism, but everything to do with partisan politics.

p. 132 Tomlinson's *Reader's Digest* career ended with his retirement in 1996, when he left the magazine to work on the Republican presidential campaign of his friend Steve Forbes. In 2002, Bush appointed Tomlinson chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the agency that oversees the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other federally funded outlets that broadcast government-sponsored news and information around the world. (Tomlinson served simultaneously as chairman of the CPB and BBG.) Under Tomlinson's supervision, VOA staffers during the Bush administration repeatedly charged

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that newscasts were skewed in order to make them overtly sympathetic to the White House, that reporters were told to emphasize the “good news” stories in Iraq while turning away from car bombs and terrorist attacks, and were chastised for quoting Democratic members of Congress who were critical of Bush’s handling of the war on terrorism. (VOA’s reporting is supposed to be neutral and professional.) “With management reportedly censoring critical stories,” the *American Prospect* reported in 2004, “morale at the VOA has plummeted.”

p. 135 Ever since America’s public television system was established through the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, it has had to dodge political bullets, nearly always fired by Republicans. Despite the consistent and high-profile presence on PBS over the years of conservatives such as William Buckley (who hosted 1,429 episodes of his public policy program *Firing Line*), John McLaughlin, Ben Wattenberg, William Bennett, Fred Barnes, Peggy Noonan, Tony Brown, and Morton Kondracke, Republicans have insisted for decades that the network suffered from a liberal bias. During the early 1970s, back when it was dubbed an “Eastern elite” bias, the Republican-controlled CPB board refused to fund news, news analysis, and political commentary programming. This, after the Nixon administration in 1972 vetoed PBS’s budget.

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pp. 137-138 Then in 2005, Tomlinson, the man charged with insuring warm relations between the public broadcasting and members of Congress, stepped into the spotlight and poisoned the relationship. Tipping logic on its head, Tomlinson insisted he needed to fix PBS’s leftward tilt in order to save it from Congressional budget cuts, even though no major cuts had been proposed in years. (Congress contributes approximately 15 percent of public broadcasting’s \$2 billion annual budget.) Those deep cuts only surfaced *after* Tomlinson led his bias charge. Worse, the cuts seemed to take Tomlinson, public broadcasting’s top steward, by complete surprise.

Taping an NPR interview that aired on June 4, 2005, Tomlinson said, “I don’t think you’ve heard any serious call in recent years from any point on the political spectrum to do anything to significantly reduce the funding for public broadcasting.” Just five days later though, a Republican-controlled House subcommittee voted to drastically reduce the federal government’s financial support for public broadcasting. As news of the June 9th draconian measure spread through Washington, DC, senior official at the CPB urged Tomlinson to immediately release a statement condemning the Republican subcommittee vote. He balked, waiting until late in the day to issue a statement that said he was simply “concerned” about the Congressional proposal.

In the end, the full Congress, by a vote of 284 to 140, agreed to restore the deep cuts to public broadcasting, which accurately reflected the wishes of most Americans; CPB's own polling showed that just 10 percent of Americans thought the federal government was spending "too much" on public broadcasting. A separate 2005 Roper poll found that Americans believed PBS provided the second best use of tax dollars; only military defense was a better use of tax dollars.

If Tomlinson's tenure as CPB chairman was known for its partisan slant, it was also marked by his trouble with the truth, which bedeviled him throughout the controversy over PBS's liberal tilt.

pp. 139-140 Attacking Bill Moyers's *Now* in a December 2003 letter to the president of PBS, Tomlinson insisted the program did "not contain anything approaching the balance *the law* requires for public broadcasting." [Emphasis added.] But there had never been a standard, or "law," requiring PBS to adhere to balance within each program. Public broadcasting's fairness and balance guideline, as spelled out in 1967's Public Broadcasting Act, mandated CPB to make sure that the recipients of its funding provide maintain "strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature." First of all, *Now* received no direct CPB funding, so Tomlinson's board had no

oversight of the program. And secondly, the balance of public broadcasting's programming was always judged as a whole, over days, weeks, and months, not minute by minute.

pp. 148-149 There was another vital piece of polling data that Tomlinson willfully ignored as he plowed ahead with his fairness and balance reform. American adults were asked, "Do you think NPR coverage of the Middle East has a pro-Israel bias, a pro-Arab bias, no apparent bias, or do you have no opinion on this?" Just 5 percent said NPR showed a "Pro-Arab and Palestinian bias." Eight percent said it suffered from a pro-Israel bias.

Given the statistics, what did Tomlinson do? He set out to create a monitoring system to document NPR's *pro-Arab bias*, even though Americans, polled during two time periods of extreme hostility in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, overwhelmingly agreed that NPR had no bias. In fact, if the responses to the poll were parsed, statistically, Americans thought NPR broadcast a pro-Israel bias. But that didn't stop Tomlinson in 2005 from announcing NPR's pro-Arab tilt had already been "documented."

Just like he was convinced public broadcasting's liberal bias had been "documented."

p. 159 There were lots of other angles to the Guard story that the press stubbornly refused to pursue. Throughout his political career in Texas Bush adamantly denied he had received a Guard Spot through preferential treatment. Then in 1999, former Texas Speaker of the House Ben Barnes confirmed that in 1968 he made a phone call to the head of the Texas Air National Guard at the request of the late Sidney Adger, a Houston oil man and longtime Bush family friend. Although a lifelong Democrat, Barnes became a well-connected lobbyist following his days in the Texas legislature and for years resisted any attempt to get dragged into a political debate about Bush's war record. It was only under threat of legal action in 1999—and only after efforts to assert “executive privilege” failed—that Barnes came forward with his statement about helping Bush. (And even then, Barnes issued it through his attorney, refusing to answer press questions.) At the time Barnes even met privately with Bush's then-campaign manager and longtime confidant Donald Evans, in order to give him a heads up about the unfolding Guard story. Bush himself sent Barnes a note thanking him “for his candor” on the matter. Bush never denied Barnes's claim about pulling strings; Bush simply insisted he never asked for the strings to be pulled and was unaware if any were.

pp. 170-171 During the final weekend in August, and after having devoted extraordinary resources to amplifying factually challenged allegations about John Kerry's war record, the national press gave Barnes's candid remarks only cursory coverage. The *Washington Post* ran just a brief wire story on the same day it printed yet another exhaustive piece about allegations surrounding Kerry's war past. In a subsequent Washington-Post.com online chat, the *Post* reporter covering the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth controversy, which was built around thirty-five-year-old war recollections, suggested Barnes's comments didn't qualify as “fresh information,” and consequently the reporter wasn't interested in “simply regurgitating old controversies.” The *New York Times* also ran a brief item on Barnes's statements deep inside its news section, next to yet another lengthy profile of Kerry's longtime Swift boat nemesis, John O'Neill. (Barnes was eventually interviewed by CBS and included in its botched *60 Minutes II* report.)

Days after word of the Barnes video surfaced, *Salon* published a telling exclusive that filled in some of the holes in the Bush Guard story. The online magazine's Mary Jacoby reported that in late 1972 George H. W. Bush had phoned a longtime family confidant in Alabama, Jimmy Allison, to ask if there was room on the local Red Blount campaign he was managing for Bush's troublesome son George, or “Georgie” as he was called. “The impression I had was the Georgie was raising a lot of hell in Houston, getting

in trouble and embarrassing the family, and they just really wanted to get him out of Houston and under Jimmy's wing," Allison's widow, Linda, told *Salon*. "After about a month I asked Jimmy what was Georgie's job, because I couldn't figure it out. I never saw him do anything," said Allison, who for years had refused to discuss the matter and who considered herself a friend of the Bush family. Asked if she'd ever seen Bush in a uniform, Allison said: "Good lord, no. I had no idea that the National Guard was involved in his life in any way."

pp. 261-262 Given the backdrop of an ongoing war which had claimed the lives of more than 2,000 U.S. troops and the fact that, sadly, Schulz was not the first U.S. hostage to be killed while insurgents' cameras rolled, word of his death might not have qualified as a major event. But the idea that it did not, according to CNN and NBC, rise to the level of news *at all* and his murder did not deserve a single on-air reference? That benchmark was hard to comprehend, although the White House likely appreciated the MSM's hushed response considering news of the Schulz execution came just hours after Bush announced, during a prime-time address, that the United States was "winning the war in Iraq."

Just as the press coverage during the run-up to the war played a unique role as the administration rolled out its marketing plan to sell, through the press, an invasion of choice,

coverage of the war itself and its chaotic aftermath proved to be just as important—and helpful—for the Bush White House. And just as Bush's presidency is inexorably linked to the events in Iraq, so too is the MSM when it comes to grading them on their Bush era coverage. From the moment Operation Iraqi Freedom was announced on March 19, 2003, no other story was as important as Iraq.

There's no question that lots of heroic and insightful MSM reporting was produced inside Iraq from journalists who deserve much admiration. But in general, the war coverage, as directed by stateside editors and producers, was marked by its early cheerleading, its sanitary presentation, and how the press, particularly television, for months at a time collectively lost interest in the story as the occupation became increasingly bogged down. For instance, in 2003, the ABC, NBC, and CBS nightly newscasts, on average, devoted 388 minutes each month to covering Iraq, according to media researcher Andrew Tyndall. By 2005 that monthly tally had decreased by more than 50 percent—to 166 minutes each month—despite the fact that the number of U.S. troops killed in Iraq increased nearly 80 percent between 2003 and 2005. In other words, as more Americans died in Iraq, the war became less newsworthy for the MSM. (For historical context, in 1972, *seven years* after U.S. Marines first arrived in Vietnam, the three network newscasts were still airing approximately 250 minutes per-month of coverage.)

p. 263 “We’re extremely happy with the coverage,” announced Captain Stewart Upton, a public affairs officer with the U.S. Central Command in Qatar, less than forty-eight hours after President Bush ordered the attack on Iraq. Like the coverage of the WMD debate during the run-up to war, it’s hard to imagine how the White House, in general, could not have scripted better press play than the kind they played out for American news consumers during March 2003.

pp. 263-264 On the night of April 1, U.S. Special Forces stormed the building and rescued her in dramatic fashion and with overpowering force. News of the midnight raid—Saving Private Lynch—became the MSM’s hottest human drama of the invasion. The headlines also helped beat back a week’s worth of bad news. By the end of March, U.S. troops were facing fiercer-than expected fighting in Iraq, early criticism was being voiced about the Pentagon trying to invade Iraq on the cheap with too few troops, and the all-important weapons of mass destruction were still missing. Saturation coverage of the meticulously stage-managed Lynch rescue helped the White House turn the page.

pp. 267-268 In her campus address, Banfield bemoaned television’s unrealistically soft coverage of the Iraq invasion:

So was this journalism or was this coverage? There is a grand difference between journalism and coverage, and getting access does not mean you’re getting the story, it just means you’re getting one more arm or leg of the story. And that’s what we got, and it was a glorious, wonderful picture that had a lot of people watching and a lot of advertisers excited about cable news. But it wasn’t journalism, because I’m not so sure that we in America are hesitant to do this again, to fight another war, because it looked like a glorious and courageous and so successful terrific endeavor, and we got rid of a horrible leader: We got rid of a dictator, we got rid of a monster, but we didn’t see what it took to do that.

p. 285 As *USA Today* suggested, “Katrina’s media legacy may be a return to a post-Watergate-like era of tougher scrutiny of the federal government and public policy issues.”

pp. 285-286 Ultimately the killer storm had little long-term effect on the press and the way it covered the Bush White House. Despite the fact the president emerged from the storm politically battered and by late 2005 and early 2006 had established himself as the most unpopular two-term president since Richard Nixon, managing to lose more than 50 points off his job approval rating since 2001, for months and months most of the D.C. press corps

steadfastly refused to alter its preferred narrative about Bush being a firm leader surrounded by a group of super savvy strategists who routinely outmaneuver hapless Democrats.

p. 287 In the wake of Abramoff's guilty plea, some press outlets did their best, belatedly, to explain the crooked lobbying empire Abramoff had built with the help of the Republican leadership. And specifically, some news outlets addressed the K Street Project, the Republicans' well-oiled money machine guidelines that required lobbyists who wanted access to GOP lawmakers not only to be registered Republicans themselves, but also to give donations exclusively to Republican candidates. Congressional leaders kept an updated dossier handy to make sure which lobbyists were abiding by the GOP's K Street Project pay-to-play rules. But even following the Abramoff guilty plea, the media's descriptions of the pivotal K Street Project seemed half-hearted at best. Appearing on the Don Imus radio show, *Newsweek's* Evan Thomas mentioned, "this thing called the K Street Project," as if he's just heard about it the day before over lunch at The Palm.

p. 288 Meanwhile, in February 2006, Bush, hoping to move public dialogue back to the issue of terror threats, suddenly shared vivid details—five years after the fact—of a plot by al-Qaida to fly airplanes into the Liberty Tower, the largest building on the West Coast.

Bush announced the deadly plan had been "thwarted." But scores of U.S. senior national security officials disagreed, insisting that al-Qaida's scheme never got past the planning stages. Nonetheless, lots of MSM outlets, including CNN and *CBS Evening News*, falling right back into their dutiful post-9/11 War on Terror mode, simply repeated White House spin and reported that the plot had been busted up.

p. 289 The story of U.S. wiretapping itself represented a paradox that neatly captured the MSM during the Bush years. On the one hand the story only came to the public's attention thanks to stand-out investigative journalism by the *New York Times's* James Risen. And for the two months following the scoop the *Times*, as well as the *Washington Post*, helped advance the story by uncovering key new details through admirable legwork. Proof that the press, post-Katrina, had broken free of its entrenched timidity, right? Not quite. Because just as with dozens of other controversial Bush administration initiatives that the press helped bring to light (torturing war prisoners, paying pundits, outing a CIA operative, lying about outing a CIA operative, etc.), once the central facts were known most news organizations dutifully reported the story and rounded up appropriate expert quotes, but few MSM outlets seemed to have their heart in the pursuit. That was particularly true of television news outlets which, for better or worse, have come to define political journalism today. Outside of the badgering that took place inside the White House briefing room,

which most Americans never saw, reporters, for most of Bush's first five years in office, rarely pressed the administration hard and they certainly never whipped up the type of sustained frenzy that was common during the Clinton administration for affairs less pressing than the warrantless wiretapping of thousands of Americans.

pp. 289-290 For instance, in the wake of the *Times*'s December 2005 wiretapping scoop, all the major news outlets had access to a Bush quote captured on tape from 2004 when he reassured Americans, "any time you hear the United States government talking about wiretap, it requires . . . a court order." That assurance certainly seemed to contradict the facts of the secret surveillance program. Yet CNN, for instance, aired the clip of that Bush "wiretap" quote just four times between December 2005 and February 2006. By contrast, during that same two months span, CNN found time to air thirty-five mentions of actress Angelina Jolie.

pp. 290-292 Interestingly, also in January while eager to promote the notion that Bush was enjoying a political rebound, *Time* announced the president had "found his voice" amid the wiretapping debate and that relieved White House aides "were smiling again" following a turbulent 2005, punctuated by the woes of New Orleans. Fact: A *Time* poll from that very same January 2006 issue showed Bush's job approval rating to be just 41 percent. Or the

lowest level recorded by *Time* since Bush's reelection. (And 20 points below the job approval rating Bill Clinton enjoyed at the dawn of his sixth year in office.) *Time* though, simply dismissed its own polling data in order to boost GOP spin that Bush had "found his voice." (A month later, Bush had gone nowhere but down in the polls.)

pp. 292-293 By 2006 it was obvious that the MSM's tilt to the right was institutional, the imbalance codified. It's simply not plausible to suggest it was a coincidence the way the mainstream press treated prominent Democrats such as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and John Kerry—the way Clinton was hounded virtually from the day he announced his candidacy for president in 1991 until the day he left office in 2001, the way Gore was ridiculed in 1999 and 2000 and depicted by the press as a liar and a fraud, and the way the MSM did the White House's bidding in 2004, portraying Kerry as a flip-flopper who may have lied about his war record. At the same time, during nearly seven years on the national stage Bush never had to deal with the kind of sustained, dishonest, and personally hostile press coverage that key Democrats were subjected to.

And while the point of *Lapdogs* is to document the press's failings, and not necessarily to offer Democrats communication or campaign strategies, it does seem obvious that if Democrats have to battle both entrenched Republicans as well as a MSM that refuses

to give the party out of power a fair shake, then Democrats are going to continue to have trouble winning elections. As blogger Peter Daou noted, "It's simple: if your core values and beliefs and positions, no matter how reasonable, how mainstream, how correct, how ethical, are filtered to the public through the lens of a media that has inoculated the public against your message, and if the media is the public's primary source of information, then NOTHING you say is going to break through and change that dynamic."

p. 295 The *New York Times* adopted an equally odd way of educating readers about another controversial Bush nominee to the federal bench, Janice Rogers Brown. Rather than inform readers about Brown's judicial record and her streak of inflammatory remarks while the larger debate over her nomination was unfolding, the *Times* waited until one day after Brown was confirmed—after the coast was clear—to finally report that Brown "often invokes slavery in describing what she sees as the perils of liberalism." As the *Daily Howler* noted, "With these day-after profiles the times announces a fact; the paper has officially stood down from traditional journalistic duties. The paper will hide from the day's leading issues; it will only lay out a few facts after the issue is settled."