

## Papered Over

The country's leading editorial pages are ignoring the Plame scandal.

by Michael Tomasky

If you've been feeling that the Bush administration may be skating free of having to wrestle with the Valerie Plame controversy and are wondering why this is happening, let me submit one possible explanation: The major media are putting no pressure whatsoever on the administration, or the president, to do anything.

See, back in the days when our leading journalistic institutions were bothering to do their jobs, there used to be these things in newspapers called "editorials." They demanded integrity and honest government of presidential administrations. They would bellow—often a little pompously or earnestly, but, on balance, in the public interest—that, say, President Johnson needed to explain to the American people what he knew about the risks of Vietnam before 1965, or that President Nixon had better come clean about what happened in Cambodia (or at the Democratic National Committee's Water-gate headquarters). Back then, editorials thundered.

Today? They still exist, of course, but now they whisper into a shoebox, essentially hoping that no one will hear them. The bully pulpit has become the 98-pound weakling's corner, and the government reaps the benefits of the shrinkage.

*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are still our leading newspapers, and no doubt they consider themselves guardians of the public interest. So one might think that when a scandal of this potential magnitude appears, they would rush in to protect that interest. An undercover agent's identity was exposed, in possible violation of the law and in obvious violation of the old-fashioned morality that conservatives supposedly revere. If ever there was a moment for a newspaper's editorial page to demand that an administration take actions or offer explanations, it's a moment like this one.

But this is what has happened: In the nearly three weeks now since the story broke on Sept. 28—that would be 18 editions of each newspaper, as I write these words—the *Times* has written all of one editorial on the Plame-Joseph Wilson-Robert Novak matter. The *Post* has published two. OK, there's a lot going on in the world to write about, and one or two might be defensible—as long as they were tough and called for some specific action from the president. So let's have a look.

The *Times* editorial was reasonably tough—not on George W. Bush but on John Ashcroft. That's fine, but it's safe; for a liberal paper, going after Ashcroft requires about as much courage as taking issue with Pat Robertson. As to Bush himself, or the White House itself, the editorial offered up some adumbrative language about the president's getting "dangerously close to the territory in which the cover-up eclipses the offense," but it made no specific call on the White House to do a single thing. Further—an amusing aside for those of you who remember this same editorial page during the 1990s, under Howell Raines—the editorial advised that there was at this point no need for an independent counsel to look into the matter. That, the *Times* wrote, would be bad, bad, bad, because it might turn into a replay of "the meandering Kenneth Starr" probe of the Clinton administration. You'll recall that the *Times* editorial page considered Starr's investigation anything but meandering at the time.

Over at the *Post*, meanwhile, they've demonstrated, contra Mies van der Rohe, that more is less. That paper's two editorials on Plame make the lone *Times* piece look like Émile Zola attacking the anti-Semites of the French army. The first editorial, from Oct. 1, wanders hither and yon, finally concluding that "the president may have an opportunity to show whether he means what he says." By doing what, however, the paper doesn't say. The second editorial, published two days later, was mostly devoted to the true but hardly pressing point that members of both parties are hypocritical when

it comes to calling for an independent counsel. It also offered the opinion that Ashcroft “has handled the current affair reasonably so far.”

So: In the face of a disclosure by the now-infamous “two senior administration officials” that may have put an agent’s life and ongoing covert operations relating to weapons of mass destruction at risk, our two leading newspapers scratch their collective chins and muse.

What should these papers be doing? Lots of things. Most dramatically, they could call on Bush, if he genuinely wants to learn the leaker’s (or leakers’) identity, to order his staff to release all reporters from their confidentiality agreements. We’d get to the bottom of this in a flash, and the journalists would be violating no ethical charge. The public interest would be served.

Short of that, the editorial pages could be demanding a specific timetable from the White House and from Ashcroft; or they could be keeping pressure on Bush to make some public demonstrations that his White House and his Department of Justice are genuinely pursuing this matter. On Wednesday, the *Times* itself reported that “senior criminal prosecutors” at the Justice Department and officials at the FBI are alarmed that Ashcroft hasn’t recused himself or appointed a special prosecutor. It’ll be worth watching to see whether the editorial page backs up the paper’s own tough reporting—or undercuts it with more editorial equivocations.

Editorial pages can’t change the world, but they often get results when they squawk loud enough. A few weeks ago, for example, the *Post* noted that Bush hadn’t had a press conference in a while; voila, he had one the next day. I said in this space last week that if Bush really wants to find out who the leakers are, he can do it quickly. These two great newspapers don’t have quite that power, but they certainly have a lot. Or used to, back when they used to use it.

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