

The *Times* Scoops That Melted

Cataloging the wretched reporting of Judith Miller

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If reporters who live by their sources were obliged to die by their sources, *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller would be stinking up her family tomb right now.

In the 18-month run-up to the war on Iraq, Miller grew incredibly close to numerous Iraqi sources, both named and anonymous, who gave her detailed interviews about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Yet 100 days after the fall of Baghdad, none of the sensational allegations about chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons given to Miller have panned out, despite the furious crisscrossing of Iraq by U.S. weapons hunters. In a Page One *Times* piece this week ("[A Chronicle of Confusion in the Hunt for Hussein's Weapons](#)," July 20), Miller acknowledges that "whether Saddam possessed such weapons when the war began remains unknown." But from there, she serially blames the failure of U.S. forces to uncover weapons of mass destruction on "chaos," "disorganization," "interagency feuds," "flawed intelligence," "looting," and "shortages of everything from gasoline to soap." Alternatively, she writes, maybe the wrong people were in charge of the search; perhaps a greater emphasis should have been placed on acquiring human sources rather than searching sites; and it could be that the military botched the op by not investing the WMD searchers with the power to reward cooperating Iraqi scientists financially or grant them amnesty.

Judith Miller finds everybody associated with the failed search theoretically culpable except Judith Miller. This rings peculiar because Miller, more than any other reporter, showcased the WMD speculations and intelligence findings by the Bush administration and the Iraqi defector/dissidents. Our WMD expectations, such as they were, grew largely out of Miller's stories.

To be sure, Miller never asserted that Iraq had an illegal WMD program or a stockpile of banned weapons. Far from it: Every time she writes about WMDs, she always constructs a semantic trapdoor allowing her to pop out the other side and proclaim, It's the sources talking, not me! But thanks to the reporting of the [Washington Post's Howard Kurtz](#), we now know Miller was a true believer who grew fat on WMD tips from her sources inside Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress organization, and that once in-country she threw a bit and saddle on the WMD detectives and rode them like Julie Krone from one end of Iraq to the other to investigate those tips.

That none of the official tips or the ones provided by Miller revealed WMDs indicates that 1) the Iraqis perfectly expunged every site Miller ever mentioned in her reporting prior to the U.S. invasion; or 2) her sources were full of bunk. Either way, if Miller got taken by her coveted sources, so did the reading public, and the *Times* owes its readers a review of Miller's many credulous pieces. Thanks to the power of the Nexis Wayback Machine, we can give the *Times* a few tips on which Miller stories need revision, redaction, or retraction.

The Renovator, Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri

The Back Story: Climbing aboard the Wayback Machine, we first touch down on the Dec. 20, 2001, piece by Miller, "Iraqi Tells of Renovations at Sites For Chemical and Nuclear Arms." The Iraqi National Congress arranges for Miller to meet defector Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, a civil engineer whose information seems reliable and significant to the U.S. government, Miller writes.

Saeed claims "to have done repair or construction work in facilities that were connected with all three classes of unconventional weapons—nuclear, chemical, and biological programs" and "personally visited at least 20 different sites that he believed to have been associated with Iraq's chemical or biological weapons programs, based on the characteristics of the rooms or storage areas and what he had been told about them during his work. Among them were what he described as the 'clean room' of a biological facility in 1998 in a residential area known as Al Qrayat."

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Many redundant sites were also built, Saeed told Miller, including "duplicate nuclear facilities." Lead-lined storage containers exist under farms around Baghdad, and he tells Miller he worked on 20 such installations. *Miller Caveats*: "There was no means to independently verify Mr. Saeed's allegations," and the government is always suspicious of defectors' claims.

Suggested Remedial Action: Saeed tells Miller he would return to Iraq "tomorrow" if Saddam were gone. As soon as we snuff Saddam, the *Times* should send Saeed to Iraq, where he can lead them on a tour of the 20 sites and 20 installations.

The Pseudonymous Ahmed al-Shemri

The Back Story: In "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest For A-Bomb Parts," Sept. 8, 2002, Miller and Michael R. Gordon publish the allegations of the pseudonymous Ahmed al-Shemri, who claims he was "involved" in chemical weapons production in Iraq before his defection two years prior. He claims that Saddam continued to develop, produce, and store chemical agents in secret mobile and fixed sites, many of them underground, in violation of weapons sanctions.

" 'All of Iraq is one large storage facility,' said Mr. Shemri, who claimed to have worked for many years at the Muthanna State Enterprise, once Iraq's chemical weapons plant."

Shemri speaks of secret labs in Mosul, of the production of 5 tons of liquid VX between 1994 and 1998, and says that it could make at least 50 additional tons of liquid nerve agent. Also, Shemri discloses that Iraq has invented a new solid form of VX that makes decontamination difficult. Both Russian and North Korean scientists are assisting Iraq. Shemri has also heard tell that Iraq stockpiles "12,500 gallons of anthrax, 2,500 gallons of gas gangrene, 1,250 gallons of aflatoxin and 2,000 gallons of botulinum throughout the country."

Miller Caveats: "An [sic] former Unscop inspector called at least some of Mr. Shemri's information 'plausible.' While he said it was impossible to determine the accuracy of all his claims, he believed that Mr. Shemri 'is who he claims to be, and worked where he claimed to work.' "

Suggested Remedial Action: Shemri should drop his pseudonym to make his background more transparent and lead the *Times* to the Mosul lab. He should also introduce his former colleagues to WMD inspectors.

The Bush Administration Case

The Back Story: Miller and Gordon report the Bush administration's findings in "White House Lists Iraq Steps To Build Banned Weapons," Sept. 13, 2002. According to the government, Iraq is attempting to purchase aluminum pipes to assist its nuclear weapons program as well as trying to develop mobile biological weapons laboratories. It also wants to obtain poison gas precursors. And it is trying to hide activities at plants in Fallujah and three other places where poisonous chlorine is made. The report alleges the plants have excess capacity and the Iraqis are diverting chlorine to the military.

Iraq continues to develop missiles banned under the 1991 cease-fire, according to the administration, and is doing prohibited research at its Al Rafah North complex. At the demolished Al Mamoun facility, where the Iraqis intended to make engines for long-range missiles, the Iraqis are rebuilding.

Miller Caveats: Some experts wonder if the aluminum tubes might be for rocket systems, not nuclear weapons work.

Suggested Remedial Action: A *Times* visit to Fallujah, Al Rafah North, Al Mamoun, and other sites alluded to is called for. Maybe the *Times* can find evidence that supports or discredits the administration's claim.

Khidhir Hamza, Nuclear Mastermind

The Back Story: Miller gives credence to the views of Khidhir Hamza, a leader of Iraq's nuclear bomb project until his 1994 defection in "Verification Is Difficult at Best, Say the Experts, and Maybe Impossible," Sept. 18, 2002.

He estimates that Iraq is within two to three years of mass-producing centrifuges for the enrichment of weapons-grade uranium, a more alarming estimate than that offered by former inspectors. Hamza's book *Saddam's Bombmaker* details Iraq's proficiency in concealing its nuclear program, Miller writes.

Miller Caveat: None. The piece is mostly about the difficulties of weapon inspections verification.

Suggested Remedial Action: If Hamza really knows the nuclear score, he should take the *Times* on an Iraqi atomic tour.

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The Defectors Complain

The Back Story: Defectors Hamza and Saeed return to complain about U.S. intelligence's lack of interest in their allegations in Miller's "U.S. Faulted Over Its Efforts To Unite Iraqi Dissidents," Oct. 2, 2002.

Pentagon adviser Richard N. Perle and Ahmad Chalabi enthusiastically slam the CIA for ignoring the Iraqi National Congress. "The I.N.C. has been without question the single most important source of intelligence about Saddam Hussein. ... What the agency has learned in recent months has come largely through the I.N.C.'s efforts despite indifference of the C.I.A."

Miller's Caveat: The government tends not to trust defectors.

Suggested Remedial Action: Either the INC was wrong or the CIA was wrong. If the INC was wrong, the *Times* should feed Perle's words back to him with a fork and spoon.

The Atropine Auto-Injectors

The Back Story: Citing administration officials, Miller reports Iraq's order of "large quantities" of atropine auto-injectors in "Iraq Said To Try To Buy Antidote Against Nerve Gas," Nov. 12, 2002. Atropine is an antidote to sarin and VX.

Miller Caveat: Atropine is also used to treat heart attacks, although the auto-injectors contain five times the normal dose.

Suggested Remedial Action: The *Times* should track the atropine order to the source, if possible, to see if the request was in preparation for a chemical weapons attack.

Madame Smallpox

The Back Story: In her Dec. 3, 2002, exclusive, "C.I.A. Hunts Iraq Tie to Soviet Smallpox," Miller reported an unnamed informant's allegations that a Russian scientist had given Iraq a "particularly virulent strain of smallpox." The scientist might have been the now deceased Nelja N. Maltseva, a Russian virologist. (See [this "Press Box"](#) for the complete take.) According to Miller, the CIA was brought in to investigate and the president was "briefed about its implications." Miller surmises that this was one reason the administration was so determined to inoculate health workers for smallpox.

Miller Caveat: "The attempt to verify the information is continuing."

Suggested Remedial Action: It's clear from Miller's wording that she didn't know the identity of the informant. Now that Iraq is beaten into the ground, surely no intelligence sources and methods would be compromised by the government revealing its informant. At the very least, a *Times* reporter should reinvestigate both the Russian and Iraqi ends of this story.

The Defectors, Again

The Back Story: Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz publicly credits the Iraqi defectors who have told the United States about Iraq's secret chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and the efforts to conceal them in Miller's "Defectors Bolster U.S. Case Against Iraq, Officials Say," Jan. 24, 2003.

Miller Caveat: Only a dozen defectors are thought to be reliable, and of them only three or four have been offered asylum.

Suggested Remedial Action: The *Times* should review the credibility of all the Iraqis who defected to Miller. Who are the defectors? What did they tell the United States? How much of it was true? How much was blarney?

The Mobile Exploitation Team Scoop

Miller files her biggest scoop ever: "Illicit Arms Kept Till Eve of War, An Iraqi Scientist Is Said To Assert," April 21, 2003. Traversing Iraq with a Mobile Exploitation Team in search of WMD, they tell her of the extraordinary claims by an Iraqi scientist in their custody. They say he claims Iraq destroyed chemical weapons and biological warfare equipment just before the war started and that he has led them to buried precursor materials from which illegal weapons can be made.

And more! He says Iraq secretly sent its unconventional weapons and technology to Syria in the mid-1990s; it had recently been cooperating with al-Qaida and turning its focus to weapons R & D and concealment. These are described to Miller by officials as the most important discoveries in the WMD hunt so far.

The precursor elements unearthed can be used to create a toxic agent banned under chemical weapons treaties, Miller alleges, although she is barred from naming the precursor, speaking to the scientist, or visiting his home. Miller reports that she also submitted her story to the military for review and agreed not to publish her findings

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for three days. The military allows her to view the baseball cap-clad scientist from a distance as he points at spots in the sand where he says precursor compounds are buried.

Miller Caveats: Close to none. Speaking on *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer* the next day, she says the scientist is more than a "smoking gun." Investigators regard him the "silver bullet" in the WMD search.

Suggested Remedial Action: See below.

The Scoop Melts

Just two days later, Miller's incendiary scoop begins to fade. In "Focus Shifts From Weapons to the People Behind Them," April 23, 2003, Miller announces a "paradigm shift" by investigators. A new emphasis on uncovering the Iraqi WMD infrastructure now takes precedence over finding the weapons because of what they've learned from the scientist, a theme she revisits on April 24 in "U.S.-Led Forces Occupy Baghdad Complex Filled With Chemical Agents." Iraq, the scientist tells investigators, has reduced its stockpiles while increasing its ability to develop new weapons.

The Mobile Exploitation Team and Miller continue to putter around Iraq, searching for intelligence documents and a missing Talmud, investigating tips about mobile germ labs to no avail, and finding a suspicious store of radioactive cobalt-60*, which is used in X-ray machines. But neither Miller nor any of the Mobile Exploitation Teams canvassing Iraq find anything in the way of WMDs.

On July 20, 2003, Miller published the [extended apology](#) cited at the top of this piece. Without asking herself if the U.S. government or the defectors whom she so devotedly courted and quoted over the last 18 months might have been shoveling her bull, Miller speculates that the WMD search failed not so much because WMD were not there, but because the military relied on the wrong methods.

What's more, the "scientist" who was supposed to be the "silver bullet" in April turns out to be a "military intelligence officer," Miller writes in her July 20 piece, without offering one word of explanation about his title change. Might we learn in a subsequent Miller dispatch that's he's really a scuba-diving instructor? And yet Miller does not give up on her ultra mysterious source, writing that what he's told authorities is corroborated by other debriefed Iraqis—that is, Iraq destroyed its stockpiles starting in 1995 but continued its WMD R & D.

Miller Caveats: At this point, every paragraph contains some sort of caveat.

Suggested Remedial Action: Miller should persuade the military to let her identify the "precursor" to a banned toxic compound mentioned in her April 21 piece. Likewise, where were the precursors buried? Why did the military intelligence officer lie and introduce himself as a scientist to U.S. forces? When did the military learn otherwise? Does this mean he lies all the time, or just selectively? Why hasn't Miller explained the meaning of his deception?

Do the military intelligence officer's other allegations listed in Miller's April 21 piece still stand? Did Iraq ship unconventional weapons and technology to Syria in the mid-1990s? Did Iraq cooperate with al-Qaida as he asserted?

The most important question to unravel about Judith Miller's reporting is this: Has she grown too close to her sources to be trusted to get it right or to recant her findings when it's proved that she got it wrong? Because the *Times* sets the news agenda for the press and the nation, Miller's reporting had a great impact on the national debate over the wisdom of the Iraq invasion. If she was reliably wrong about Iraq's WMD, she might have played a major role in encouraging the United States to attack a nation that posed it little threat.

At the very least, Miller's editors should review her dodgy reporting from the last 18 months, explain her astonishing credulity and lack of accountability, and parse the false from the fact in her WMD reporting. In fact, the *Times'* incoming executive editor, Bill Keller, could do no better than to launch such an investigation.

The Miller corpus is so huge I only cited a couple dozen of her stories here. If I missed something good, drop me a line at pressbox@hotmail.com

Correction, July 30, 2003: This article originally misstated the isotope of cobalt that military investigators discovered in their search for unconventional weapons. The isotope is cobalt-60, not cobalt-80. [[Return](#) to the corrected sentence.]