

A Study of Bias in the Associated Press

By Peter Phillips, Sarah Randle, Brian Fuch, Zoe Huffman, and Fabrice Romero

On October 25, 2005 the American Civil Liberties (ACLU) posted to their website forty-four autopsy reports, acquired from American military sources, covering the deaths of civilians who died while in U.S. military prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2002–2004. A press release by ACLU announcing the deaths resulted from torture was immediately picked up by Associated Press (AP) wire service, making the story available to U.S. corporate media nationwide. A thorough check of Nexus-Lexus and Proquest electronic data bases, using the keywords ACLU and autopsy, showed that at least 95 percent of the daily papers in the U.S. did not to pick up the story nor did AP ever conduct follow up coverage on the issue.

The autopsy reports provide positive proof of widespread torture by U.S. forces. Our research team at Project Censored felt that this story should have been front page news throughout the country. Instead the story was hardly covered and quickly disappeared.

One of forty-four U.S. military autopsy reports reads as follows: “Final Autopsy Report: DOD 003164, (Detainee) Died as a result of asphyxia (lack of oxygen to the brain) due to strangulation as evidenced by the recently fractured hyoid bone in the neck and soft tissue hemorrhage extending downward to the level of the right thyroid cartilage. Autopsy revealed bone fracture, rib fractures, contusions in mid abdomen, back and buttocks extending to the left flank, abrasions, lateral buttocks. Contusions, back of legs and knees; abrasions on knees, left fingers and encircling to left wrist. Lacerations and superficial cuts, right fourth and fifth fingers. Also, blunt force injuries, predominately recent contusions (bruises) on the torso and lower extremities. Abrasions on left wrist are consistent with use of restraints. No evidence of defense injuries or natural disease. Manner of death is homicide. Whitehorse Detainment Facility, Nasiriyah, Iraq.”

A second report describes how a twenty-seven-year-old Iraqi male died while being interrogated by Navy Seals on April 5, 2004 in Mosul, Iraq. During his confinement he was hooded, flex-cuffed, sleep deprived and subjected to hot and cold environmental conditions, including the use of cold water on his body and hood. The exact cause of death was “undetermined” although the autopsy stated that hypothermia may have contributed to his death.

Another Iraqi detainee died on January 9, 2004 in Al Asad, Iraq, while being interrogated. He was standing, shackled to the top of a doorframe with a gag in his mouth, at the time he died. The cause of death was asphyxia and blunt force injuries.

Anthony Romero, Executive Director of ACLU stated, “There is no question that U.S. interrogations have resulted in deaths.” ACLU attorney Amrit Sing adds, “These documents present irrefutable evidence that U.S. operatives tortured detainees to death during interrogations.”

Our research showed that the *Los Angeles Times* covered the story on page A-4 with a 635-word report headlined “Autopsies Support Abuse Allegations.” Fewer than a dozen other daily newspapers including: *Bangor Daily News*, Maine, page 8; *Telegraph-Herald*, Dubuque Iowa, page 6; *Charleston Gazette*, page 5; *Advocate*, Baton Rouge, page 11; and a half dozen others actually covered the story. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and the *Seattle Times* buried the story inside general Iraq news articles. *USA Today* posted the story on their website. MSNBC posted the story to their website, but apparently did not consider it newsworthy enough to air on television.

Given that nearly every daily newspaper in the United States subscribes to AP wire service and that AP had in fact sent out the torture story led us to question if story selection bias was widespread within U.S. newspapers and if bias was evident within the AP system itself.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Associated Press is a not-for-profit cooperative wire service for news at a national and global level. The mission of the AP is “to be the essential global news network.” It boasts of “distinctive news services with the highest quality, reliability and objectivity with reports that are accurate, balanced and informed.” The AP has 242 bureaus

worldwide that delivers news report twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to 121 countries in five languages including English, German, Dutch, French, and Spanish and has 3,700 employees. In the U.S. alone, 1,700 daily, weekly, non-English, college newspapers, and 5,000 radio and television stations receive the AP. The AP reaches over a billion people every day via print, radio, or television. Internationally, the AP has 8,500 subscribers. To subsidize revenue, the AP has sold selections of text, photo, audio, and video to commercial online operations. Annual revenues in 2004 were \$630 million.

There are two types of members in the cooperative: regular and associate. The regular membership is only available to printed newspapers, mainly dailies, published in the U.S. It entails regular exclusive contributions of news to AP and entitles the member to a vote in elections for the AP Board of Directors. Associate membership is available to daily newspapers, some weekly newspaper, and broadcast stations but do not allow a vote in elections for the Board of Directors. Associate members also contribute news to the AP and receive the same services.

Members pay a subscription fee, based on the size of circulation, to have access to the newswire services. The smaller the circulation, the smaller the services and thus the smaller the number of stories available to the newspaper. If a story is run on the state wire, only those in that state will see the story. But if the story is more nationally pertinent then it will be put out on the national wire, and so forth up to the international level. Once the story has been put out on the wire, it is up to the individual member whether the story will go into their newspaper, air on their radio or television station.

The AP Board of Directors is made up of twenty-two newspaper and media executives including the Presidents/CEOs of ABC, Cox News, McClatchy, Gannett, Scripps, Tribune, Hearst, Washington Post and several smaller/regional newspaper chains. Two directors are members of conservative policy councils including the Hoover Institute and the Business Round Table. Three are on the board of directors of Mutual Insurance, and one is on the board of the world's largest defense contractor, Lockheed Martin. The AP Board represents a solid corporate media network of the largest publishers in the U.S. and provides a clear tilt towards right-wing conservative perspectives (see appendix for full listing of AP directors).

IMPEACHMENT MOVEMENT AND AP

Impeachment advocates are mobilizing widely in the U.S. Over 1,000 pro-impeachment letters to the editors in major newspapers were published during a six month period from October 2005 to March of 2006. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* letter writer George Matus says, “I am still enraged over unasked questions about exit polls, touch-screen voting, Iraq, the cost of the new Medicare...who formulated our energy policy, Jack Abramoff, the Downing Street Memos, and impeachment.” David Anderson in McMinnville, Oregon pens to the *Oregonian*, “Where are the members of our congressional delegation now in demanding the current president’s actions be investigated to see if impeachment or censure are appropriate actions?” William Dwyer’s letter in the *Charleston Gazette* says, “Congress will never have the courage to start the impeachment process without a groundswell of outrage from the people.”

Dozens of city councils, boards of supervisors, and local and state level Democrat central committees have voted for impeachment. Arcata, California voted for impeachment on January 6, 2006. The City and County of San Francisco, voted Yes on February 28. The Sonoma County Democrat Central Committee (CA) voted for Impeachment on March 16. The city council of Sebastopol California voted for impeachment in May. The townships of Newfane, Brookfield, Dummerston, Marlboro, Rockingham, Battleboro and Putney in Vermont all voted for impeachment in March and April. The New Mexico State Democrat party convention rallied on March 18 for the “impeachment of George Bush and his lawful removal from office.” The national Green Party called for impeachment on January 3. New Hampshire Democrats voted for Impeachment on June 9. Democrats in Maine called for Impeachment June 4. Vermont’s Democrat party called for impeachment in April, and an impeachment resolution was introduced into the Illinois Legislature April 24. Brookline, Massachusetts called for impeachment in late May of 2006.

Op-ed writers at the *St. Petersburg Times*, *Newsday*, *Yale Daily News*, *Barrons*, *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Boston Globe* have called for impeachment. The *San Francisco Bay Guardian* (1/25/06) *The Nation* (1/30/06) and *Harpers* (3/06) published cover articles calling for

impeachment. As of March 16, 2006, thirty-two U.S. House of Representatives have signed on as co-sponsors to House Resolution 635, which would create a Select Committee to look into the grounds for recommending President Bush's impeachment.

Polls show that nearly a majority of Americans favor impeachment. In October of 2005, Public Affairs Research found that 50 percent of Americans said that President Bush should be impeached if he lied about the war in Iraq. A Zogby International poll from early November 2005 found that 53 percent of Americans say, "If President Bush did not tell the truth about his reasons for going to war with Iraq, Congress should consider holding him accountable through impeachment." A March 16, 2006 poll by American Research Group showed that 42 percent of Americans favored impeaching Bush.

Despite all this advocacy and sentiment for impeachment, AP has yet to cover this emerging mass movement. While AP has covered most incidental calls for impeachment listed above, they have not evaluated impeachment as a widespread national issue. Instead AP has covered impeachment very much like the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial on March 16 which said it is the "the loony left" seeking impeachment, and perhaps some Democrats will join in feeding on the "bile of the censure/impeachment brigades."

Along this line AP released a national story by Deborah Hasting on April 29, 2006 critical of former attorney general Ramsey Clark's impeachment efforts. Hasting's writes [Clark] "lives in a reality of his own making..." and went on to link Clark to an international "rogues gallery" of criminals including: Slobodan Milosevic, (See Chapter 14 for a discussion of Milosevic's trail) Charles Taylor, Moammar Gadhafi, and Saddam Hussein. Hasting dismisses Clark and impeachment as "gullible and misinformed," leaving out the fact that tens of millions of American agree with Clark's position.

AP's coverage of impeachment leaves one to question—if a national movement calling for the impeachment of the President is rapidly emerging and AP and the corporate media are not covering it, is there really a national movement for the impeachment of the President?

AP BIAS ON THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

Alison Weir, Joy Ellison, and Peter Weir of the organization If Americans Knew recently conducted research on the AP's reporting of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The study was a statistical analysis of the AP newswire in the year 2004, looking at the number of Israeli and Palestinian deaths reported. Specifically they looked at headlines and the lead paragraph coverage to determine what an average person would actually read.¹

The study found that there is a strong correlation between the likelihood of a person's death receiving coverage by AP and that person's nationality. In 2004 there were 141 reports of Israeli deaths in AP headlines and lead paragraphs, while in reality there were only 108 Israeli deaths, this difference comes from reporting a death more than once. During this same period, Palestinian deaths were reported as 543 by the AP, but at the time 821 Palestinians had been killed. The ratio of actual number of Israeli conflict deaths to Palestinian deaths in 2004 was 1:7, yet AP reported deaths of Israelis to Palestinians at a 2:1 ratio. In other words, the AP reported 131 percent of Israeli deaths, whereas they only reported 66 percent of Palestinian deaths.

The same could be said of AP's reporting of children's deaths. Nine reports of Israeli children's deaths were reported by the AP in headlines and leading paragraphs in 2004, while eight actually occurred. Only twenty-seven Palestinian children deaths were reported by AP when actually 179 children died. While there were twenty-two times more Palestinian children's deaths than Israeli children's deaths, the AP reported 113 percent of Israeli children's deaths and 15 percent of Palestinian children's deaths. Israeli children's deaths were reported at a rate seven and one-half times greater than that of Palestinian children.

The report also looked into how often the AP used the words "clash" and "clashes" in AP reports pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They found that of all the conflicts the AP reported in 2004, forty-seven deaths occurred during a clash, and all of these forty-seven deaths were Palestinian. AP covered over 700 news stories on deaths in Israel and Palestine in 2004, showing that while there is plenty of coverage of the conflict, the information given was significantly biased.

AP BIAS ON THE OVERTHROW OF PRESIDENT ARISTIDE IN HAITI

On February 29, 2004 AP widely reported that President Aristide was ousted by Haitian rebels and that the United States provided an escort to take Aristide out of the country to a safe asylum. Within twenty-four hours an entirely different story emerged that placed the U.S. at the center of a forced regime change. Instead of the U.S. being the supportive facilitator of Aristide's safety, independent news sources through Pacifica radio news were reporting that Aristide was kidnapped by U.S. forces.

AP quickly changed their story. On March 1, 2004 an AP report by Deb Riechman said, "White House officials said Aristide left willingly and that the United States aided his safe departure. But in a telephone interview with the Associated Press, Aristide said: 'No. I was forced to leave.' 'They were telling me that if I don't leave they would start shooting and be killing in a matter of time,' Aristide said during the interview, which was interrupted at times by static. It was unclear whether Aristide meant that rebels or U.S. agents would begin shooting. Asked to identify the 'agents,' Aristide said: 'White American, white military.' 'They came at night . . . There were too many. I couldn't count them,' he added."

Another account on March 1, 2004 by AP writer Clive Bacchus stated that "Aristide said he was being held prisoner at the presidential palace in Bangui, Central African Republic, according to Randall Robinson, former president of TransAfrica, a Washington-based group that monitors U.S. policy toward Africa and the Caribbean and supported Aristide. 'About twenty American soldiers, in full battle gear with automatic weapons, came to the residence . . . took them to the airport, at gunpoint, put them on a plane,' said Robinson, who currently lives on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts. 'He said three times before he hung up 'Tell the world it was a coup, it was a coup.'"

The last AP report of Aristide exclaiming he was kidnapped by the U.S. in a State Department coup was on June 27, 2004. Since then there have been sixty news stories by the AP with Aristide mentioned in the articles. Of these stories none mentioned Aristide's claim that he was kidnapped by the United States military. None mention the U.S. backing of the coup. There have been no articles examining

claims that the U.S. government sent 20,000 M-16s to the Dominican Republic, many of which ended up in the hands of the Haitian rebels, nor about how the U.S. blocked arms sales to Haiti during Aristide's presidency. Nor has AP covered that Aristide was elected in 2000 by 92 percent of the vote in an election declared free and fair by the Organization of American States.

Continuing stories about Haiti on AP's wire since June of 2004 say Aristide was ousted by rebel forces with no mention U.S. involvement. AP's bias in favor of the State Department's version of the Aristide's removal is a deliberate re-writing of history and a documented case of AP-sanctioned forgetting.²

AP'S CHARACTER ASSASSINATION OF CYNTHIA MCKINNEY

During the morning of March 29, 2006, Congress member Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) allegedly slapped a Capitol Hill police officer who has grabbed her while walking to a congressional session. According to a March 30, 2006 AP account, "McKinney, 51, scuffled with a police officer . . . when she entered a House office building without her identifying lapel pin and did not stop when asked. Several police sources said the officer asked her three times to stop. When she kept going, he placed a hand somewhere on her and she hit him." AP writer Giovanna Dell'Orto in Atlanta, McKinney's home district, quoted DeKalb County commissioner Hank Johnson on March 30, 2006 as saying, "Voters should hold her (McKinney) accountable for her irresponsible and reckless behavior." Dell'Orto went on to include quotes from e-mails sent to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* say that, McKinney should be "arrested," and "she is a laughing stock because of her continued childish and boorish behavior."

According to John Judge, (McKinney's chief of staff) there have been repeated misidentifications of Cynthia McKinney by the Capital Police for the past year. The police have actually put McKinney's picture up in their office to make sure officers knew her by sight. While an April 6, 2005 AP report made a significant issue of McKinney's failture to wear her congressional lapel pin, Judge claims that members of Congress often do not wear their pins, and are recognized by police nonetheless.

On April 1, 2005 AP's Laurie Kellman did report on Black leaders coming to McKinney's defense including Rev. Darrel Willigan, the president of Concerned Black Clergy, and celebrities Danny Glover, and Harry Belafonte. However, AP reports quickly degraded to a piling on of negative comments in multiple succeeding articles, each published in April 2005:

"I don't think it's fair to attack the Capital Police," Patrick McHenry (R-NC)

"I don't think any of it justifies hitting a police office," said House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi.

"She (McKinney) has a long history of racism," said Tom Delay, former House majority leader.

"With a grand jury investigation and little support from House of Representative colleagues, Cynthia McKinney reversed course and apologized for an altercation . . ."

"Apology or not, U.S. Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) should be held fully accountable for what appears to be her inexcusable conduct and attitude toward police authority."

"Congresswomen Cynthia McKinney messed up, . . . apparently she realized that; she has since apologized on the House floor."

In a national AP release April 5, Doug Gross (Atlanta) traced McKinney's history as the first Black woman elected to Congress from Georgia in 1992. "Known mostly for her flashy fashions, including braids and gold tennis shoes, McKinney had a brash style that made her a target for conservatives and an embarrassment to some of her more moderate democratic colleagues," Gross writes. "She once said," Gross pens, . . . "that officials in the Bush administration had advance knowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks" . . . she had been criticized for her outspoken support of the Palestinian cause in Israel."

In a TV interview on April 24, 2006 McKinney was repeatedly badgered by WGCL-TV (CBS) Atlanta reporter about the Capital Hill police incident. At the end of the interview an irritated McKinney said while still on film, "Oh crap, now you know what . . ." they lied to Coz and Coz is a fool." Coz Carson is McKinney's communication director. McKinney then immediately stated that her comments at that point were off the record, but the station aired her taped words anyway. CNN joined in the fray by broadcasting her comments, and AP released a wire report with the headline, "TV Station Catches McKinney Bad-mouthing Staffer."

One supporter of Cynthia McKinney stated, “Cynthia is guilty of being in Congress while Black.” Undoubtedly racism is a factor in the coverage of this incident. However there seems to be even a bigger factor in AP’s coverage. McKinney represents a strong Black congresswoman, who has historically challenged the upper-class white establishment, especially the neo-conservatives in power today. (See Chapter 10) Her positions on 9/11, Palestine, and social class clearly come from a left progressive perspective, as she openly challenges the status quo. In its coverage of McKinney, AP has demonstrated bias towards the status quo and the powerful in the U.S.

ASSOCIATE PRESS AS PROTECTORS OF THE POWERFUL

AP is a massive institutionalized bureaucracy that feeds new stories to nearly every newspaper and radio/TV station in the United States and the world. They are so large that top-down control of single news stories is literally impossible. However, our evidence clearly indicates a built-in bias favoring the powerful. ACLU evidence on torture is ignored by the corporate press and AP never mentions it again. The State Department’s position on Haiti becomes established history. Cynthia McKinney is bashed and marginalized. Coverage of the Israel-Palestine situation has a clear pro-Israel bias, and the national impeachment movement is totally ignored. The American people absorb these biases and make political decisions on skewed understandings. Without media systems that provide balanced, fair and accurate reporting democracy is faced with a dismal future.

Peter Phillips is a professor of sociology at Sonoma State University and Director of Project Censored. Sarah Randle, Brian Fuch, Zoe Huffman, and Fabrice Romero undergraduate research interns with Project Censored.

APPENDIX

Associated Press Board of Directors

Burl Osborne

Chairman of the AP Board since 2002

Director since 1993 and member of the Executive Committee of The Associated Press

President, Publishing Division from 1995 to 2001

Director from 1987 to 2002 of the Belo Corp.; Publisher Emeritus since 2001

Director at J. C. Penney Holding Company

R. Jack Fishman

President and CEO of Lakeway Publishers, Inc., that produces the *Citizen Tribune* for the Morristown, Tenn., area, along with the *Tullahoma News*

Dennis J. FitzSimons

Chairman, President and CEO of Tribune, Co.

Member of The Business Council as well as the Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago

Joe Hladky

President and Publisher of The Gazette Co.

Walter E. Hussman Jr.

Publisher of Arkansas Democrat-Gazette and Hoover Institution Board of Overseers

Julie Inskeep

Publisher of *The Journal Gazette* in Fort Wayne, Indiana

George B. Irish

President of Hearst Newspapers and a senior vice president of Hearst Corporation

Past president of the Texas Daily Newspaper Association

Currently serves on the boards of the American Press Institute, the Newspaper Association of America, and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Millikin University

Boisfeuillet (Bo) Jones

Publisher and chief executive officer of *The Washington Post* Next chairman of the Newspaper Association of America Member of the University of Maryland School of Journalism Board of Visitors

Mary Junck

CEO and Chairman of the Board of Lee Enterprises Inc. chain of fifty-eight mid-West daily newspapers
Former senior executive at Times Mirror Company

David Lord

Board member of PAGE buying cooperative and the Newspaper Association of America Current president of the Inland Press Association

Kenneth W. Lowe

President, CEO and Director of The E.W. Scripps Company

Douglas H. McCorkindale

Chairman of the board at Gannett Co., Inc. since 2001
CEO and President of Gannett Co., Inc. from 2000 to 2005 Vice Chairman of Gannett Co., Inc. from 1984 to 2001
Board of Directors at Lockheed Martin Corp. Continental Airlines, Inc. and Mutual Insurance Company Ltd.

R. John Mitchell

Publisher of the *Rutland Herald* and long-time publisher of *The Times Argus* in Barre
Charter member of the New England Press Association Hall of Fame

Steven O. Newhouse

Chairman of Advance.net
Editor in Chief at the *Jersey Journal*

Gary Pruitt

Chairman, president, and CEO of The McClatchy Company
Board member of the James Irvine Foundation
Secretary of the Board at the Newspaper Association of America
Board of directors at Mutual Insurance, Co.

Michael E. Reed

CEO at GateHouse Media Inc., formerly known as Liberty Group Publishing, Inc.
Board of Directors at the Newspaper Association of America and the Inland Newspaper Association

Bruce T. Reese

President and CEO of Bonneville International Corp.
Joint Chairman of the Board of the National Association of Broadcasters
Board of Directors of the Radio Advertising Bureau

Jon Rust

Publisher of the *Southeast Missourian*

Co-President of Rust Communications since 2001

William Dean Singleton

CEO of MediaNews Group Inc.

Former Chairman of the Newspaper Association of America (worked on easing FCC regulations on cross ownership)

Jay R. Smith

President of Cox Newspapers, Inc.

Chairman of the Board at the Newspaper Association of America from 2005–2006

Vice Chairman of the Board at the American Press Institute

Board of Directors for Mutual Insurance, Co. Ltd.

David Westin

President of ABC News since 1996

Board Member at the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences

H. Graham Woodlief

President of the Publishing Division

Vice President of Media General Inc. since 1989

Board Chairman of Southern Production Program Inc.

Notes

1. "Deadly Distortion: Associated Press Newswire Coverage of Israeli and Palestinian Deaths," If Americans Knew, 2005, <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/>.
2. Duff, Lyn and Dennis Bernstein, *The Other Regime Change: Overthrowing Haiti's President Jean-Bertrand Aristide*, Chapter 13 in *Impeach the President: the Case Against Bush and Cheney*, Edited by Dennis Loo and Peter Phillips, Seven Stories Press: New York, 2006.