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Congressman Conyers Hammers the Washington Post

By Congressman John Conyers

truthout | Letter

Friday 17 June 2005

Mr. Michael Abramowitz, National Editor;
Mr. Michael Getler, Ombudsman;
Mr. Dana Milbank



The Washington Post
1150 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Sirs:



I write to express my profound disappointment with Dana Milbank's June 17 report, "Democrats Play House to Rally Against the War," which purports to describe a Democratic hearing I chaired in the Capitol yesterday. In sum, the piece cherry-picks some facts, manufactures others out of whole cloth, and does a disservice to some 30 members of Congress who persevered under difficult circumstances, not of our own making, to examine a very serious subject: whether the American people were deliberately misled in the lead up to war. The fact that this was the Post's only coverage of this event makes the journalistic shortcomings in this piece even more egregious.



In an inaccurate piece of reporting that typifies the article, Milbank implies that one of the obstacles the Members in the meeting have is that "only one" member has mentioned the Downing Street Minutes on the floor of either the House or Senate. This is not only incorrect but misleading. In fact, just yesterday, the Senate Democratic Leader, Harry Reid, mentioned it on the Senate floor. Senator Boxer talked at some length about it at the recent confirmation hearing for the Ambassador to Iraq. The House Democratic Leader, Nancy Pelosi, recently signed on to my letter, along with 121 other Democrats asking for answers about the memo. This information is not difficult to find either. For example, the Reid speech was the subject of an AP wire service report posted on the Washington Post website with the headline "Democrats Cite

Downing Street Memo in Bolton Fight". Other similar mistakes, mischaracterizations and cheap shots are littered throughout the article.

The article begins with an especially mean and nasty tone, claiming that House Democrats "pretended" a small conference was the Judiciary Committee hearing room and deriding the decor of the room. Milbank fails to share with his readers one essential fact: the reason the hearing was held in that room, an important piece of context. Despite the fact that a number of other suitable rooms were available in the Capitol and House office buildings, Republicans declined my request for each and every one of them. Milbank could have written about the perseverance of many of my colleagues in the face of such adverse circumstances, but declined to do so. Milbank also ignores the critical fact picked up by the AP, CNN and other newsletters that at the very moment the hearing was scheduled to begin, the Republican Leadership scheduled an almost unprecedented number of 11 consecutive floor votes, making it next to impossible for most Members to participate in the first hour and one half of the hearing.

In what can only be described as a deliberate effort to discredit the entire hearing, Milbank quotes one of the witnesses as making an anti-semitic assertion and further describes anti-semitic literature that was being handed out in the overflow room for the event. First, let me be clear: I consider myself to be friend and supporter of Israel and there were a number of other staunchly pro-Israel members who were in attendance at the hearing. I do not agree with, support, or condone any comments asserting Israeli control over U.S. policy, and I find any allegation that Israel is trying to dominate the world or had anything to do with the September 11 tragedy disgusting and offensive.

That said, to give such emphasis to 100 seconds of a 3 hour and five minute hearing that included the powerful and sad testimony (hardly mentioned by Milbank) of a woman who lost her son in the Iraq war and now feels lied to as a result of the Downing Street Minutes, is incredibly misleading. Many, many different pamphlets were being passed out at the overflow room, including pamphlets about getting out of the Iraq war and anti-Central American Free Trade Agreement, and it is puzzling why Milbank saw fit to only mention the one he did.

In a typically derisive and uninformed passage, Milbank makes much of other lawmakers calling me "Mr. Chairman" and says I liked it so much that I used "chairmanly phrases." Milbank may not know that I was the Chairman of the House Government Operations Committee from 1988 to 1994. By protocol and tradition in the House, once you have been a Chairman you are always referred to as such. Thus, there was nothing unusual about my being referred

to as Mr. Chairman.

To administer his coup-de-grace, Milbank literally makes up another cheap shot that I "was having so much fun that [I] ignored aides' entreaties to end the session." This did not occur. None of my aides offered entreaties to end the session and I have no idea where Milbank gets that information. The hearing certainly ran longer than expected, but that was because so many Members of Congress persevered under very difficult circumstances to attend, and I thought - given that - the least I could do was allow them to say their piece. That is called courtesy, not "fun."

By the way, the "Downing Street Memo" is actually the minutes of a British cabinet meeting. In the meeting, British officials - having just met with their American counterparts - describe their discussions with such counterparts. I mention this because that basic piece of context, a simple description of the memo, is found nowhere in Milbank's article.

The fact that I and my fellow Democrats had to stuff a hearing into a room the size of a large closet to hold a hearing on an important issue shouldn't make us the object of ridicule. In my opinion, the ridicule should be placed in two places: first, at the feet of Republicans who are so afraid to discuss ideas and facts that they try to sabotage our efforts to do so; and second, on Dana Milbank and the Washington Post, who do not feel the need to give serious coverage on a serious hearing about a serious matter - whether more than 1700 Americans have died because of a deliberate lie. Milbank may disagree, but the Post certainly owed its readers some coverage of that viewpoint.

Sincerely,

John Conyers, Jr.



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