

# Journalism: It's all about personal integrity

View from the West

Ethan Casey

I spent two months in Pakistan in the first half of 1999, and I remember well how aggressively Nawaz Sharif's government was bullying the Pakistani media. I sought out and spoke to Maleeha Lodhi, then editor of *The News*, and Najam Sethi of *The Friday Times*. Both were alarmed and anxious about the prospects of a free press and, not coincidentally, for Pakistan itself. Sethi even showed me where government *goondas* had broken into his bedroom and dragged him away, to be held until international pressure had forced Nawaz to release him.

The phrase "international pressure" has often been used as a synonym or euphemism for the "soft power" or "moral suasion" the liberal West brings to bear on illiberal regimes in Pakistan and elsewhere, often to good effect. Last week's decision by *Time Inc.*, which owns *Time* magazine and is owned by the Time Warner Corporation, to capitulate in a crucial and blatantly politicised press-freedom case in the US puts paid to the myth of the liberal West. In the perpetual struggle between the people and the state, it's now every man for himself.

Some two years ago Robert Novak, a prominent right-wing columnist and CNN talking head, broke the law by revealing the name of CIA agent Valerie Plame in a column written to punish her husband, former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson IV, for having embarrassed the Bush administration by revealing — as if this were even a surprise — that it had justified the Iraq war using false information. Mysteriously, two other journalists — Judith Miller of *The New York Times* and Matthew Cooper of *Time* — are being threatened with jail time for refusing to reveal their sources on Plame, but Novak isn't.

I wonder: Could this anomaly possibly be explained by Novak's status as a high-profile hatchet man for Bush?

On June 30, in a mealy-mouthed statement notable for its gall, *Time Inc.*

editor-in-chief Norman Pearlstine used the First Amendment to the US Constitution, the Watergate scandal, and the Supreme Court as sandbags from behind which to lob this pathetic salvo:

"Despite these concerns, *Time Inc.* shall deliver the subpoenaed records [Cooper's notes] to the Special Counsel in accordance with its duties under the law. The same Constitution that protects the freedom of the press requires obedience to final decisions of the courts and

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respect for their rulings and judgments. That *Time Inc.* strongly disagrees with the courts provides no immunity. The innumerable Supreme Court decisions in which even Presidents have followed orders with which they strongly disagreed, evidences that our nation lives by the rule of law and that none of us is above it. "We believe that our decision to provide the Special Prosecutor with the subpoenaed records obviates the need for Matt Cooper to testify and certainly removes any justification for incarceration."

If I were Cooper I would *want* to be in jail, where at least I would sleep well. Shame on *Time Inc.* More to the point, shame on Norman Pearlstine, because a company exists only notionally, but a human being bears moral and political responsibility. What would Martin Luther King have said to Pearlstine's despicable

claim that the Constitution "requires obedience to final decisions of the courts"? King, Henry David Thoreau and other great Americans understood that legality and morality are not equivalent, and that respect for the law entails disobeying it when it's wrong, and accepting the consequences of that choice. Anyone who says *Time Inc.* had no choice but to betray its reporter by obeying the courts is morally illiterate.

More than frightening, it's a nauseating time to be a journalist. Which is why, except for this column and any other projects I choose to take on consistent with my own integrity, I'm getting out. I certainly won't be trying to make a living as a journalist anymore; there's no longer an honest living to be made in American journalism. "For 30 years" — that is, since *The Washington Post* courageously encouraged and protected its young reporters Woodward and Bernstein and brought low the corrupt Nixon White House — "we've assumed that strong journalistic institutions would stick together and protect their employees," the veteran journalist and author David Halberstam told *The Los Angeles Times* last week. "Now, a new wind is blowing. That united front is gone."

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised; even before *Time* became a cog in an enormous corporate machine, its raison d'être was to sustain the bland fictions of public life. "There's that God-awful *Time* magazine world out there, and one can make raids on it," Norman Mailer once memorably remarked. But journalism must be unofficial and independent and, when necessary (which is often) oppositional, or it has no purpose. And if they can't step up to the plate when it really matters, the self-importance of so many media people has no justification.

Fundamentally it really is about personal integrity, not institutions or even constitutions. As I said, it's every man for himself.

Ethan Casey's book *Alive and Well in Pakistan: A Human Journey in a Dangerous Time* is available in Pakistan and India.  
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