

NEW YORK

## The Source of the Trouble

**Pulitzer Prize winner Judith Miller's series of exclusives about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—courtesy of the now-notorious Ahmad Chalabi—helped the New York Times keep up with the competition and the Bush administration bolster the case for war. How the very same talents that caused her to get the story also caused her to get it wrong.**

By [Franklin Foer](#)



Judith Miller discusses post-Saddam Iraq on *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*.  
(Photo: The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer)

For critics of the Iraq war, the downfall of Ahmad Chalabi occasioned a hearty, unapologetic outpouring of Schadenfreude—a loud cheer for a well-deserved knee to the administration's gut. In fact, it was possible to detect a bit of this spirit on the front page of the *New York Times*. On May 21, the editors arrayed contrasting images of the banker turned freedom fighter turned putative Iranian spy. Here he is smirking behind Laura

Bush in the House of Representatives gallery as the president delivers his State of the Union address. There he is looking bleary and sweaty, after Iraqi police stormed his home and office in the middle of the night. An analysis by David Sanger went so far as to name names of individuals who had associated themselves with the discredited leader of the Iraqi National Congress. The list, he wrote, included “many of the men who came to dominate the top ranks of the Bush administration . . . Donald H. Rumsfeld, Paul D. Wolfowitz, Douglas J. Feith, Richard L. Armitage, Elliott Abrams and Zalmay M. Khalilzad, among others.”

The phrase “among others” is a highly evocative one. Because that list of credulous Chalabi allies could include the *New York Times'* own reporter, Judith Miller. During the winter of 2001 and throughout 2002, Miller produced a series of stunning stories about Saddam Hussein's ambition and capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction, based largely on information provided by Chalabi and his allies—almost all of which have turned out to be stunningly inaccurate.

For the past year, the *Times* has done much to correct that coverage, publishing a series of stories calling Chalabi's credibility into question. But never once in the course of its coverage—or in any public comments from its editors—did the *Times* acknowledge Chalabi's central role in some of its biggest scoops, scoops that not only garnered attention but that the administration specifically cited to buttress its case for war.

The longer the *Times* remained silent on Chalabi's importance to Judith Miller's

reporting, the louder critics howled. In February, in the *New York Review of Books*, Michael Massing held up Miller as evidence of the press's "submissiveness" in covering the war. For more than a year, Slate's Jack Shafer has demanded the paper come clean.

But finally, with Chalabi's fall from grace so complete—the Pentagon has cut off his funding, troops smashed his portrait in raids of the INC office—the *Times'* refusal to concede its own complicity became untenable. Last week, on page A10, the paper published a note on its coverage, drafted by executive editor Bill Keller himself. The paper singled out pieces that relied on "information from a circle of Iraqi informants, defectors, and exiles bent on 'regime change.'" The note named Ahmad Chalabi as a central player in this group.

This time, however, the omission of Judith Miller's name was conspicuous. "Some critics of our coverage during that time have focused blame on individual reporters. Our examination, however, indicates that the problem was more complicated."

"It was precisely her unpleasant aggressiveness that helped force the story—the marriage of WMD and global jihadists—closer to the top of the agenda."

The editor's note was correct: The Judy Miller problem *is* complicated. That is, the very qualities that endeared Miller to her editors at the *New York Times*—her ambition, her aggressiveness, her cultivation of sources by any means necessary, her hunger to be first—were the same ones that allowed her to get the WMD story so wrong.

Miller is a star, a diva. She wrote big stories, won big prizes. Long before her WMD articles ran, Miller had become a newsroom legend—and for reasons that had little to do with the stories that appeared beneath her byline. With her seemingly bottomless ambition—a pair of big feet that would stomp on colleagues in her way and even crunch a few bystanders—she cut a larger-than-life figure that lent itself to Paul Bunyan-esque retellings. Most of these stories aren't kind. Of course, nobody said journalism was a country club. And her personality was immaterial while she was succeeding, winning a Pulitzer, warning the world about terrorism, bio-weapons, and Iraq's war machine. But now, who she is, and why she prospered, makes for a revealing cautionary tale about the culture of American journalism.

On a summer afternoon in the early eighties, Judy Miller invited her exercise-averse boyfriend Richard Burt, then the *Times'* defense reporter, to watch her swim laps in the Washington Hilton pool. Afterward, lounging in the sun, Miller veered into one of her favorite lines of conversation: Does chemical or nuclear warfare inflict the most damage? Burt, who would go on to become an assistant secretary of State in the Reagan administration, has a serious cast of mind. But even he was taken aback by Miller's dark thoughts. "I remember being struck that there are not many people sitting around on a beautiful day thinking about weapons of mass

destruction," he says.

Miller's dramatic way of looking at the world may have something to do with her family's show-business background. During the forties and fifties, her father, Bill Miller, ran the Riviera nightclub in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Famed for its retractable roof, the Riviera staged shows by Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Tito Puente. When the state highway commission ordered the Riviera condemned in 1953, Miller made his way to Vegas, proving his impresario bona fides by reviving the careers of Elvis Presley and Marlene Dietrich.

Judy Miller arrived in the *Times*' Washington bureau in 1977, as part of a new breed of hungry young hires, prodded in part by the sting of losing the Watergate story to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post. "She was unlike the other guys there. That's why they brought her to the paper," says Steven Rattner, another old boyfriend, who eventually left his *Times* gig to become an investment banker.

Installed amid colleagues—they were almost all men—who'd spent decades working their way up the paper's food chain, Miller stood out immediately for her sharp elbows. While the culture of the paper assiduously practices *omertà*—what happens in the newsroom stays in the newsroom—Miller is cause for reporters to break the code of silence. An unusual number of her co-workers have gone out of their way to separate themselves and their paper from Miller. Few are brave enough to attach their names to the stories, but they all sound a similar refrain. "She's a shit to the people she works with," says one. "When I see her coming, my instinct is to go the other way," says another. They recite her foibles and peccadilloes, from getting temporarily banned by the *Times*' D.C. car service for her rudeness to throwing a fit over rearranged items on her desk. Defenders are few and far between. And even the staunchest ones often concede her faults. Bill Keller told me in an e-mail, "She has sharp elbows. She is possessive of her sources, and passionate about her stories, and a little obsessive. If you interview people who have worked with Sy Hersh, I'll bet you'll find some of the same complaints."

Miller's brief when she arrived at the paper was primarily to cover the Securities and Exchange Commission. But that wasn't her true interest. At Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School, studying for a master's in public affairs, she traveled to Jerusalem in 1971 to research a paper. "I became fascinated with the Israeli and the Palestinian dispute, and spent the rest of the summer traveling for the first time to Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon," Miller told me in an e-mail. (Miller responded by e-mail to some questions and ignored others.) "By the end of the summer, I was hooked." As a correspondent for *The Progressive* and National Public Radio, she turned her academic interest into a professional one, traveling to the region and cultivating a network of highly placed sources. Nina Totenberg, a colleague from NPR, recalls a party in the mid-seventies at which Jordan's King Hussein caught a glimpse of Miller across the room and howled, "Juuuudddy!"

"Kiiiiinnnggg," she responded.

In 1983, the *Times* put her Middle East experience to use by installing her as its Cairo bureau chief, allowing her to range from Tripoli to Damascus. Paradoxically, powerful Middle Eastern men, with their fervent sexism, actually represented an opportunity for female reporters. Viewing the women with utter condescension, these monarchs and dictators had no fear of granting them extraordinary access. They would pontificate without worries of repercussions. Miller had ready access to many Mideast potentates. As she shuttled between meetings with Hussein, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, and Palestinian Liberation Organization chief Yasser Arafat in 1984, her colleagues joked about the "Miller Plan" for peace.

Miller also racked up the sort of adventure tales that correspondents love to dispense after a dram or two of whiskey. She witnessed a hanging in Sudan, flew across Afghanistan in a rickety Northern Alliance helicopter held together in places by duct tape. "Judy is a smart, relentless, incredibly well-sourced, and fearless reporter," says Keller. "It's a little galling to watch her pursued by some of these armchair media ethicists who have never ventured into a war zone or earned the right to carry Judy's laptop."

From her first day at the *Times*, Miller's life and work have been hard to separate, which for a reporter is both a strength and a weakness. "She's a passionate person—she gets caught up in her sources passionately," one of her *Times* colleagues told me. Friends from her earliest days in Washington noted that she didn't surround herself with people her own age. She sought out the best and brightest at the city's highest levels, dating Larry Sterne, the *Washington Post's* foreign editor, and hanging out with the defense gurus Richard Perle and Walter Slocum. "These people were powerful. But they were also interesting, and Judy liked talking to them. She is curious and enthusiastic," says one friend from this period.

And she got caught up in her coverage of the Middle East. It was a passion she acknowledged in the introduction to her 1996 book on Islam, *God Has Ninety-Nine Names*: "While I have tried to keep an open mind about traditions and cultures that differ from my own, I make no apology for the fact that as a Western woman and an American, I believe firmly in the inherent dignity of the individual and the value of human rights and legal equality for all. In this commitment, I, too, am unapologetically militant."

King Hussein caught a glimpse of Miller across the room and howled, "Juuuuddddd." "Kiiiiinnnggg," she responded.

**B**y the late nineties, she was focused largely on the nexus between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Her dispatches from the region frequently contained nightmare scenarios. One piece, co-written with William Broad, warned that "a pilotless plane spraying 200 pounds of anthrax near a large city might kill up to a

million people—if the winds were right, if no rain fell, if the nozzles did not get clogged, if the particles were the right size, if the population had no vaccinations, and so on.” It might have seemed like a risk too far-fetched to mention, but she felt compelled to mention it. The country at the time seemed to be enjoying the equivalent of that sunny day at the Hilton. The economy was booming, and the biggest problem seemed to be managing prosperity—and a president’s personal failings. “Remember, everyone was obsessed with the White House sex story,” says *New Yorker* writer Jeffrey Goldberg, who was invited by the paper to join Miller in an investigation unit to examine Al Qaeda. Goldberg found her an impossibly difficult colleague. But he also realized her value. “She happened to be prescient about the rise of the global jihad. And it was her unpleasant hyper-aggressiveness that enabled her to help force a very important story—the possibility of a marriage between WMD proliferators and global jihadists—closer to the top of the agenda.”

Before September 11, Miller, with her anxieties about anthrax attacks, could seem like Chicken Little; afterward, she seemed more like Cassandra, the only one who’d been right. And this fact gave her tremendous power at the paper. Eight months before the attacks, she published a piece documenting Al Qaeda’s WMD ambitions—part of a series that later earned her (along with several colleagues) a Pulitzer. *Germs*, a book about bioterrorism co-written with two *Times* colleagues, appeared less than a month after the attacks and soon hit the best-seller list. She began making regular appearances on CNN and PBS, becoming a public face of the paper—a celebrity that grimly solidified when she received a hoax letter at her desk containing a white, powdery substance resembling anthrax.

What’s more, she had spent several decades acquiring access to Washington’s Middle East experts, some of whom suddenly wielded tremendous influence in the Bush administration. Miller’s many doubters at the *Times* were effectively silenced. She had emerged as one of the paper’s biggest stars, with the kind of “competitive metabolism” that new editor Howell Raines—he’d taken over from Joseph Lelyveld the week before 9/11—made into a crusade. According to a friend of Raines’s, as well as one of Miller’s colleagues at the paper, the editor pulled her aside after the attacks. “Go win a Pulitzer,” he told her.

For the next two years, she supplied the paper with a string of grim exclusives. There was the defector who described Saddam Hussein’s recent renovation of storage facilities for nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. There was her report that a Russian virologist might have handed the regime a particularly virulent strain of smallpox. To protect themselves against VX and sarin, she further reported, the Iraqis had greatly increased the importation of an antidote to these agents. And, most memorably, she co-wrote a piece in which administration officials suggested that Iraq had attempted to import aluminum tubes for nuclear weapons. Vice-President Dick Cheney trumpeted the story on *Meet the Press*, closing the circle. Of course, each of the stories contained important caveats. But together they painted a horrifying picture. There was just one problem with them: The vast majority of these blockbusters turned out to be wrong.

Long before Miller's current difficulties, she was known at the paper for a different sin: rudeness, amplified by a legendary temper. Seth Faison, a foreign correspondent who has punched his ticket with the *Times* in China, tells the following story: In 1993, Miller had been billeted over to the Metro desk from her day job as a staff writer at the *Times Magazine* to help report on the World Trade Center bombing. Faison, a young Metro reporter, had left the office for jury duty. During his absence, Miller ensconced herself at his desk. "I had been at the *Times* for less than two years, and I'm not a very assertive person. And so I just said, 'Judy, could I sit here?' She said, 'You have to go someplace else.' "

When Faison went to his editors, they did nothing to help him. "They held up their hands palm up, like, 'I'm not going to touch this one.' They didn't want the wrath of Judy Miller." And so for a week, without ever acknowledging Faison's refugee status, Miller occupied his territory.

The epicenter of Miller-bashing is the Washington bureau. The phenomenon has a long history. During her tumultuous time as deputy bureau chief in the late eighties, she proposed reassigning many reporters out, to other bureaus and lesser posts. Adam Clymer, who served as the paper's political editor, recalls, "She ran the bureau day to day, and that regime was probably the unhappiest in my experience."

According to Clymer, she would call reporters and editors in the middle of the night to complain about stories. She found an unusual way to pass on others' complaints as well. To listen to a daily feed from the afternoon story meeting in New York, she moved a squawk box onto her desk in the newsroom, where everyone else in the bureau could hear the feed, too. They could eavesdrop on top editors ripping into colleagues' stories with vicious remarks obviously not intended for wide distribution.

At a paper that prides itself on at least a veneer of collegiality, Miller's reporting tactics often left jaws agape. According to two *Times* veterans, reporters at the Pentagon and on other beats have frequently found themselves calling their sources, only to be told, "I've already talked to Judy Miller."

They charge her with forcing her bylines onto stories, staunchly arguing for the addition of her name after adding mere dribs and drabs of information. "She's not afraid to get her byline by bigfooting. In fact, that's how she gets many of them," charges one of her colleagues.

But when there is trouble, it appears she's more than happy to pass around the responsibility. One incident that still rankles happened last April, when Miller co-bylined a story with Douglas Jehl on the WMD search that included a quote from Amy Smithson, an analyst formerly at the Henry L. Stimson Center. A day after it appeared, the *Times* learned that the quote was deeply problematic. To begin with, it had been supplied to Miller in an e-mail that began, "Briefly and on background"—a condition that Miller had flatly broken by naming her source. Miller committed a further offense by paraphrasing the quote and distorting Smithson's

analysis. One person who viewed the e-mail says that it attributed views to Smithson that she clearly didn't hold. An embarrassing correction ensued. And while the offense had been entirely Miller's, there was nothing in the correction indicating Jehl's innocence.

The bad feelings from these incidents have festered over time, and as problems have come to light with Miller's reporting, her critics at the paper have eagerly piled on. Over the course of the past six months, Washington reporters have complained vociferously about Miller. They have been especially angry that Miller appears on *Larry King Live* and *Paula Zahn Now* to discuss Iraqi WMD. "There's anger and embarrassment among the staff that Judy is still the voice of the *Times* on the subject," says one reporter. In addition, some of these reporters have frankly told their editors that they will never share a byline with her. All this pressure has succeeded in forcing official reforms. The paper's current policy is that any time Miller visits Washington, her editor Matthew Purdy must provide bureau chief Philip Taubman and his deputies with advance notice and explain her purpose for visiting. In January, the bureau officially deprived Miller of her desk. Although this was ostensibly done to make space, according to denizens of the bureau it had an intentional symbolic value, too. "It gave the bureau a way to move her out without saying it was moving her out," says a reporter.

But she's less an anomaly in the newsroom than a caricature of it. She's the toughest of fighters. But "blaming her for that," Richard Burt told me, "would be like blaming a fish for swimming; it was necessary for survival in that place."

And also, no one has ever questioned her work ethic—she is indefatigable. "Judy Miller is a tireless and absolutely relentless reporter," managing editor Jill Abramson told me. "In the Washington bureau, she was often the last reporter still working, sometimes making phone calls until the wee morning hours."

According to her colleagues, she has a long history of stumbling off professional peaks only to scale them again. Her stewardship of the Washington bureau was followed by a move to New York to work as deputy media editor. After her coverage of the Gulf War, she took a turn reporting on philanthropy. But with each dip, ever-growing reserves of gumption ultimately allowed her to rehabilitate herself. One of Miller's old Washington sources and friends told me that years of competition had "really thickened her skin. The *Times* really coarsened her."

On the day the *Times'* editor's note ran, she wasn't hiding with a feather pillow over her face. She was covering a microbiology conference in New Orleans. And just as the paper had explained Miller's overreliance on Chalabi, she sent me an e-mail implying that she hadn't had a close relationship with the INC leader: "I co-wrote the toughest profile of him that our paper published."

If Miller is an extreme example of the *Times'* ultracompetitive mind-set, she is also an example of an inherent problem of journalism: its reliance on sources. As a Middle East hand, and Saddam Hussein's biographer, Miller spent the nineties paying careful attention to Iraq. But the country posed a major journalistic

challenge: Saddam hardly ever granted visas to Western journalists. When he did, the secret police and Ministry of Information carefully restricted their movements, ensuring that they didn't return home with telling stories. And the CIA hadn't done any better infiltrating the Baathists. "For the CIA and every other Western intelligence service, Iraq was a black hole, a denied area, almost impossible to get good intelligence out of," says former agency operative Bob Baer.

There was really only one source that claimed to have secret contacts within the country: the Iraqi National Congress. The INC had begun as an umbrella organization, cobbled together by the CIA to corral a disparate band of anti-Saddam forces into an effective opposition. At the start, Chalabi had been a functionary in this group, arranging logistics for Iraqi politicians visiting officials in Washington. But with his charming persona, he quickly became the group's public face—an ascent that alienated many of the groups he claimed to represent. He had always known how to handle the Western press. As a banker in Amman, he had been a source of gossip about intrigue in King Hussein's palace. Reporters—including Judy Miller—turned to him for dirt.

During the late nineties, Chalabi became one of the most contentious figures in Washington, inspiring as much partisan adoration as hatred. For a journalist covering Iraq, however, Chalabi represented an enormous temptation. Sure, there were doubts. But these could always be chalked up to the CIA's bureaucratic impulse to blame Chalabi for botching a 1996 coup, even though it hardly evinced competence itself. Besides, his defectors had so much splashy information. Plenty of journalists—including the *Times'* James Risen, Lowell Bergman, and Chris Hedges—couldn't resist working with INC-associated defectors. But none of them went so far as Miller in cultivating Chalabi.

There's an important difference in reportorial style between Miller and her colleagues. Risen and Bergman are diggers, excavating documents and sources hidden deep in the bureaucracy. Miller, on the other hand, relies on her well-placed, carefully tended-to connections to nab her stories. In February, on the public-radio show "The Connection," she said, "My job was not to collect information and analyze it independently as an intelligence agency; my job was to tell readers of the New York *Times*, as best as I could figure out, what people inside the governments, who had very high security clearances, who were not supposed to talk to me, were saying to one another about what they thought Iraq had and did not have in the area of weapons of mass destruction."

Her Iraq coverage didn't just depend on Chalabi. It also relied heavily on his patrons in the Pentagon. Some of these sources, like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, would occasionally talk to her on the record. She relied especially heavily on the Office of Special Plans, an intelligence unit established beneath Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith. The office was charged with uncovering evidence of Al Qaeda links to Saddam Hussein that the CIA might have missed. In particular, Miller is said to have depended on a controversial neocon in Feith's office named Michael Maloof. At one point, in December 2001, Maloof's security clearance was



revoked. In April, Risen reported in the *Times*, "Several intelligence professionals say he came under scrutiny because of suspicions that he had leaked classified information in the past to the news media, a charge that Mr. Maloof denies." While Miller might not have intended to march in lockstep with these hawks, she was caught up in an almost irresistible cycle. Because she kept printing the neocon party line, the neocons kept coming to her with huge stories and great quotes, constantly expanding her access.

Where Miller exhibited so much hostility to other reporters, she would be fawning and generous to her sources. "Judy treats her sources well, with a sense of loyalty. She's an attentive and courteous person to them," one *Times* reporter says. Her strength was that she viewed the relationships as more than transactional. Her sources were her friends.

According to some of her critics, they have occasionally been more than friends. In the early eighties, she shared a Georgetown house with her boyfriend, Wisconsin congressman Les Aspin—a rising star in the Democratic Party, who went on to become Bill Clinton's first secretary of Defense. Aspin, many noted, had appeared a dozen times in Miller's pieces, offering sage words about national security. Certain catty colleagues liked to read these stories aloud. Each time the phrase "Aspin said" appeared, a reporter would add, "rolling over in bed." When Reagan nominated Richard Burt to be assistant secretary of State for European affairs, Jesse Helms and other right-wingers bludgeoned him for their relationship. "It would help [your chances for confirmation]," Orrin Hatch delicately wrote to Burt, "if you could lay to rest the rumors about Judith Miller's articles on arms control appearing so soon after your own meetings with her. . . ."

The gossip about Miller's romantic life was circulated most widely by a columnist writing in *Spy* magazine under the pseudonym J. J. Hunsecker. He chronicled her exploits, referring to her as "frisky deputy bureau chief Judith 'Is that a banana in your pocket . . .?' Miller." As a commentator on the mores of the *Times*, Hunsecker lacked a certain subtlety. "Miller has been enriching the lives of high-level sources around Washington with her own very special brand of journalistic involvement," the columnist sneered in 1988. But gradually, the allegations moved from innuendo to out-and-out rumormongering. The column reported, outlandishly, that President George H. W. Bush called his resident political genius, Lee Atwater, into his office "and informed him that it might be better if he ended his very special relationship with Miller." Hunsecker was hardly credible. He could produce some howlers, and nothing he wrote could necessarily be believed. But the point wasn't his information, but the way he obtained it. Colleagues within the *Times* had come to despise Miller so greatly that they apparently picked up the phone, called *Spy*, and dished their hearts out.

**T**he war in Iraq was going to be Miller's journalistic victory lap. Just before the bombs began falling on Baghdad, Miller embedded with Mobile Exploitation Team (MET) Alpha—the unit charged with scouring Iraq for weapons of mass destruction.

No other journalist would have such access, which meant she would have the exclusive when they uncovered the WMD stockpiles, the smoking gun. As one reporter who covered the war told me, "This was going to be the show." Back in Kuwait, the Coalition had arranged for helicopter pools that would swoop reporters into WMD sites as MET Alpha uncovered them.

The Pentagon had seemingly rewarded Miller's prewar reporting with this sweet arrangement. But it also extracted a high price for her presence. Under most embedding agreements, journalists were provided access in exchange for adhering to a few rigid but simple rules: No reporting on forthcoming military tactics, no revealing of sensitive information about troop positions. For the most part, these rules were enforced by common sense. Reporters censored themselves. Transgressions, they understood, would lead the military to cancel their access and throw them out of Iraq. So, by agreeing to preapproval of her pieces, Miller signed up for something far more restrictive.

Last month, I traded e-mail with Eugene Pomeroy, a former National Guard soldier who is now working in Baghdad as a contractor for a security firm. During the war, Pomeroy served as the public-affairs officer for MET Alpha. This meant that he had one primary duty: to shepherd Judy Miller around Iraq. It wasn't a particularly happy experience. In one e-mail to me, he joked, "As far as I can gather, not many people at Defense liked this woman, and the sense I got was that she wasn't their problem anymore now that she was in Iraq. Maybe they were hoping that she'd step on a mine. I certainly was."

Miller guarded her exclusive access with ferocity. When the *Post's* Barton Gellman overlapped in MET Alpha for a day, Miller instructed its members not to talk to him.

According to Pomeroy, as well as an editor at the *Times*, Miller had helped negotiate her own embedding agreement with the Pentagon—an agreement so sensitive that, according to one *Times* editor, Rumsfeld himself signed off on it. Although she never fully acknowledged the specific terms of that arrangement in her articles, they were as stringent as any conditions imposed on any reporter in Iraq. "Any articles going out had to be, well, censored," Pomeroy told me. "The mission contained some highly classified elements and people, what we dubbed the 'Secret Squirrels,' and their 'sources and methods' had to be protected and a war was about to start." Before she filed her copy, it would be censored by a colonel who often read the article in his sleeping bag, clutching a small flashlight between his teeth. (When reporters attended tactical meetings with battlefield commanders, they faced similar restrictions.)

As Miller covered MET Alpha, it became increasingly clear that she had ceased to respect the boundaries between being an observer and a participant. And as an embedded reporter she went even further, several sources say. While traveling with MET Alpha, according to Pomeroy and one other witness, she wore a military

uniform.

When Colonel Richard McPhee ordered MET Alpha to pull back from a search mission and regroup in the town of Talil, Miller disagreed vehemently with the decision—and let her opinions be loudly known. The *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz reprinted a note in which she told public-affairs officers that she would write negatively about his decision if McPhee didn't back down. What's more, Kurtz reported that Miller complained to her friend Major General David Petraeus. Even though McPhee's unit fell outside the general's line of command, Petraeus's rank gave his recommendation serious heft. According to Kurtz, in an account that was later denied, "McPhee rescinded his withdrawal order after Petraeus advised him to do so."

Miller guarded her exclusive access with ferocity. When the *Washington Post's* Barton Gellman overlapped in the unit for a day, Miller instructed its members that they couldn't talk with him. According to Pomeroy, "She told people that she had clearance to be there and Bart didn't." (One other witness confirms this account.)

As MET Alpha began its work in April, Miller sent home a blockbuster about an Iraqi scientist in her unit's custody. According to Miller, the scientist had told the unit that Iraq had destroyed chemical- and biological-warfare equipment on the eve of the war. And—here's the real coup—the scientist had led the squad to buried ingredients for chemical-weapons production. Although she told readers that her unit prevented her from naming these precursor elements or the scientist, the military did permit Miller to view him from a distance. "Clad in nondescript clothes and a baseball cap, he pointed to several spots in the sand where he said chemical precursors and other weapons material were buried," she wrote. And on PBS's *NewsHour*, she was even more emphatic: "What they found is a silver bullet in the form of a person."

But these scoops, like the story about the scientist, tended to melt quickly in the Iraqi desert. And very soon into the postwar era, the costs of her embedding agreement and her passion for the story became clear. Even though she had more access to MET Alpha, the best seat in the house, she was the only major reporter on the WMD beat to miss the story so completely. MET Alpha was a bumbling unit; and even if it hadn't been bumbling, it wouldn't have made a difference—there were no WMDs. The *Post's* Gellman, on the other hand, hadn't embedded with a unit, and didn't negotiate any access agreements. What's more, he had the intellectual honesty to repudiate some of his own earlier reporting. He came away from Iraq with a stark, honest story: "Odyssey of Frustration: In Search for Weapons, Army Team Finds Vacuum Cleaners."

**W**hen the *Times* published its editor's note last week, it read, "Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper."

This was a bit too sweeping. While there were no heroes within the *Times*, there were editors who raised serious and consistent doubts about Miller's reportage.

During the run-up to the war, investigations editor Doug Frantz and foreign editor Roger Cohen went to managing editor Gerald Boyd on several occasions with concerns about Miller's overreliance on Chalabi and his Pentagon champions, especially Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith. For instance, Frantz rejected a proposal for a story in which Pentagon officials claimed to have identified between 400 and 1,000 WMD sites, without providing much backup evidence to justify their claims. "At the time, people knew her reporting was suspect and they said so," one *Times*man told me. But Raines and Boyd continually reaffirmed management's faith in her by putting her stories on page 1. (Both Boyd and Raines declined to speak for this story.)

Raines had a clear reason to defend Miller. By early 2002, she had become one of the paper's most valuable assets. The *Times* was being soundly challenged by the *Washington Post* in its coverage of the war on terror. He'd been especially irked by the attention that his rival garnered with Bob Woodward's meaty reporting from inside the CIA and FBI throughout the fall and winter, tracing preparations for war in Afghanistan and early investigations into 9/11. For a man who made it his mission to raise the paper's "competitive metabolism" and expressed his thoughts in sports metaphors, the defeat was especially painful. Judith Miller was the strongest card he had to play. No other reporter had managed to win the trust of the administration hawks and could so consistently deliver *Post*-beating scoops.

There were also ideological reasons for him to turn to Miller. During the summer of 2002, Raines had taken a beating for stories by Patrick Tyler that raised questions about support for the war among the Republican foreign-policy establishment. (To be sure, Tyler's story had arguably attributed antiwar sentiments to Henry Kissinger that he didn't hold.) The *Weekly Standard's* Bill Kristol pummeled Raines for surrendering to his biases, placing the *Times* in an "axis of appeasement" that had "now mobilized in a desperate effort to deflect the president from implementing his policy."

The Raines response was very un-Rainesian. Instead of "flooding the zone" and pushing ahead with a crusade, he told one close friend that he wanted to prove that he could cover a story straight. An ex-*Times* editor told me, "He wanted to throw off his liberal credentials and demonstrate that he was fair-minded about the Bush administration. This meant that he bent over backwards to back them often." In October 2002, James Risen ran an authoritative story casting serious doubt on a purported Prague meeting between the 9/11 terrorist Mohammad Atta and Iraqi intelligence—a meeting that supporters of the war trumpeted as evidence of a Bin Laden—Hussein nexus. Because the story had run in the Monday paper, Raines didn't have a chance to vet it over the weekend. After the fact, he complained to an editor that it had gone too far. A former editor says, "In the months before the war, Raines consistently objected to articles that questioned the administration's claims about Iraq's links to Al Qaeda and September 11 while never raising a doubt about Miller's more dubiously sourced pieces about the presence of weapons of mass destruction."

Another management problem was that Miller, like many in her profession, didn't take well to editing. "Judy has never been shy about crawling over the heads of editors," says one retired *Times* colleague. And Raines had crafted Judy's assignment so that it became extremely easy for her to circumvent the desks. According to one of her editors, she worked stories for investigative one day, foreign the next, and the Washington bureau the day after. It was never clear who controlled or edited her. When one desk stymied her, she'd simply hustle over to another and pitch her story there. It was an editorial vacuum worsened by the absence of a top editor on the investigative unit, her nominal home. Between Doug Frantz's departure for the Los Angeles *Times* in March 2003 and Matthew Purdy's arrival in January 2004, Miller had almost no high-level supervision from editors with investigative experience.

Many editors I spoke to consider Miller to be such a high-maintenance, uncollegial writer that they'd rather not deal with her at all. One *Times* veteran says, "She considers us to be her minions." The process of editing her sounds like an exercise in misery, requiring a constant subjection to her fits of anger; it draws editors into her interoffice disputes with other reporters. Another adds, "There's only one editor who has had the skill, energy, and willingness to harness her energy—Stephen Engelberg." But after Engelberg edited a series on Al Qaeda for which Miller and her unit won a Pulitzer in 2001, he left the paper, leaving Miller without the strong hand capable of directing and containing her zealotry. It was a perilous dynamic: By being so difficult, she became so much more vulnerable to journalistic sins than her more affable colleagues.

**S**o why did it take so long to run an editor's note? In the newsroom, there are several theories. The first, and least persuasive, is the Sulzberger factor. "There was always the sense, true or not, that she had a benefactor at the top," says Seth Faison. When Miller joined the *Times* in the late seventies, she arrived in the Washington bureau at about the same time as Arthur Sulzberger Jr.—a recent college graduate getting hands-on experience in the shop floor of the family business. The D.C. office had only about half a dozen reporters under the age of 35, including Sulzberger, Miller, Steve Rattner, and Phil Taubman. They clung to one another. After work, they would retire to Duke Zeibert's for a drink. The crowd became even more sociable. When Miller dated Rattner, they shared a weekend house on the Eastern Shore of Maryland with Sulzberger and his wife, Gail. There's no evidence that Sulzberger ever directly intervened to help Miller, and Miller has undergone enough career reversals to make this hard to believe. Still, that friendship has become well known within the newsroom. Fairly or unfairly, there's a sense that Miller has protection at the absolute top—and that fear reportedly deters some editors from challenging her.

The timing of the editor's note probably had far more to do with the ethos Bill Keller hoped to set for his regime. When he took the job, he promised to avoid ugly recriminations against Raines's favorites. He felt it was time to move on. His paper would be a far friendlier, more humane place. In a September meeting, according to two sources at the paper, he quietly removed Miller from her coverage of Iraqi

WMD. (She denies she was pulled from the beat.) But Keller didn't want to make a public issue out of this. At a lunch with the paper's Washington bureau this spring, reporter Douglas Jehl questioned him on the paper's WMD coverage, asking if the *Times* owed its readers a thorough reconsideration of its use of Chalabi. Keller replied that he didn't want to single out any specific reporters for abuse—the same line the paper took in the editor's note. He believed it was enough to correct the coverage itself. And it might have been were it not for the combustion of Miller's critics outside and inside the newsroom, all spurred on by the deteriorating situation in Iraq, which forced even the U.S. government to disown the notorious source at the center of the story.

**W**hile the *Times* has conducted its inquiry, Miller's WMD coverage has also occasioned a series of less high-minded questions: namely, does Judy Miller live in an apartment divided? During the past year, three intriguing documents have been pushed into the public view that may shed light on this matter. Since 1993, Miller has been married to Jason Epstein, the legendary Random House editor who reinvented paperback publishing in the early fifties. Last May, in the *New York Review of Books*, Epstein published an excoriation of the Bush administration's march to war. The war, he blared, was "a preemptive assault whose urgency has not been adequately explained and for which no satisfactory explanation, beyond the zealotry of its sponsors, may exist." This can be rather effortlessly interpreted as a shot across his wife's bow: Hadn't Miller's oeuvre painted a sufficiently frightening picture of Saddam's arsenal?

Document No. 2 also appeared in the *New York Review*. Before I cite the article, however, it is necessary to say a brief word about the venue. Epstein was a founding father of the journal. His first wife, Barbara Epstein, remains an editor there. Therefore, the *Review's* pages were odd ones to showcase a vivisection of Judy Miller's reporting. But last February, the *Review* published the critic Michael Massing's devastating analysis of Miller's work. Document No. 3 helps set the Massing article in context. The same month that Barbara Epstein ran Massing's piece, Jason Epstein paid tribute to her in a *New York Times Magazine* food column. Writing a poignant reminiscence of their 1953 honeymoon, he told readers: "The marriage proved to be bountiful. When after many years, it ended, the love that we celebrated on that December day [their wedding day] remained intact."

**P**redictably, the editor's note inaugurated a new round of grumbling inside the paper. Reporters complained that the note had mentioned no names, implicitly equating Miller's sins with those of less-culpable reporters like Michael Gordon and Chris Hedges. Others remarked that it had been buried on A10, not a space normally reserved for serious statements about the paper. One *Timesman* speculated that these complaints would wend their way into the press: "The rumbling on this reminds me of all the Howell-Blair stuff. Once people started complaining publicly . . . the proverbial cat was out of the bag." And of course, by making this observation to me, he had fulfilled his own prophecy. A few days later, Daniel Okrent, the public editor, was expected to unveil the conclusions of his own investigation, one he had vowed not to conduct because it concerned events that

preceded his—and the new, kinder, more transparent *Times'*—arrival.

But making the process more transparent is easier than reforming the profession itself, which inevitably relies on people. People like Miller, with her outsize journalistic temperament of ambition, obsession, and competitive fervor, relying on people like Ahmad Chalabi, with his smooth, affable exterior retailing false information for his own motives, for the benefit of people reading a newspaper, trying to get at the truth of what's what.