

# OPINION

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## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

# Press failed its duty; nation went to war

Donald Trump isn't the first president to obliterate the truth, and he won't be the last.

In the prelude to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush and his administration unleashed a full-scale propaganda campaign, seeking to convince the American people that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and that war was necessary.

The claims weren't true. There were no WMDs. The U.S. had no evidence of



**JIM VAN NOSTRAND**

them. The American press swallowed the lies, failed to ask tough questions and abrogated its duty to determine the truth, except for a few determined reporters at Knight Ridder Newspapers.

"Shock and Awe," a movie that opened Friday, tells the story of those journalists — Jonathan Landay, Warren Strobel, Joe Galloway and John Walcott.

It dramatizes an ugly chapter in the history of journalism.

### Voices lost in the tumult

It's impossible to fully describe the herd mentality that gripped the media in the year and a half between the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003.

I had a front-row seat to witness that history. I was a web editor for Knight Ridder Digital who was called to D.C. to manage the company's online coverage of a war that seemed to be preordained.

President Bush had proclaimed to the world after Sept. 11, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." The leading newspapers and cable networks took that mantra to heart.

They breathlessly parroted every morsel and scrap of disinformation fed to them by the government spin masters. They jostled for seats in the administration's coveted inner sanctum and served as dutiful stenographers for every dubious claim. Judith Miller of the New York Times was a notorious culprit. Vice President Dick Cheney and the other neoconservatives in the administration would spoon-feed her "scoops," then cite her stories at press conferences and on the cable talk shows.

Those who questioned the administration's WMD claims — as Landay, Strobel, Galloway and Walcott did — were branded as unpatriotic or worse, by both the public and their peers. Their voices were drowned out by a growing crescendo of war drums in newsprint and on the airwaves.

Some of Knight Ridder's own newspapers



AP Photo/Jerome Delay  
**A government building burns March 21, 2003 during heavy bombardment of Baghdad by U.S.-led forces. The phrase 'shock and awe' described the Pentagon's strategy of hitting the Iraqis hard enough to stun them into quick surrender.**



Vertical Entertainment  
**Actors James Marsden, left, and Woody Harrelson portray Knight Ridder reporters Warren Strobel and Jonathan Landay.**

refused to run their stories. When questioned, editors expressed disbelief in their reporting, often with some lame variation of "The New York Times isn't saying that." In one telling scene from the movie, Walcott asks one of those editors, "The truth doesn't sell papers anymore?"

### Fabricating the evidence

We knew that President Bush ordered the Pentagon to begin drawing up plans for the Iraq invasion in early 2001, shortly after he took office. The attacks later that year on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provided a convenient pretext for toppling

### WHERE TO WATCH

"Shock and Awe" opened Friday in limited theaters nationwide. None are in Oregon.

The movie is available on demand through iTunes, DirecTV and most cable systems, including Charter here in Astoria.

Go to [bit.ly/shock-and-awe-timeline](http://bit.ly/shock-and-awe-timeline) for a multimedia timeline of events portrayed in the movie, and links to the original stories by Knight Ridder reporters.

Saddam, who had remained in power despite his 1991 defeat in Operation Desert Storm by Bush's father, President George H.W. Bush.

We knew that professional government analysts saw no evidence of WMDs — our reporters, with decades of contacts in the intelligence community, were talking to them.

And we knew that officials in power were blatantly lying to the American people. Somewhere between the analysts and the White House, evidence was fabricated or cherry-picked to support the administration's campaign, led by Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, to oust Saddam and plant a democracy in the Middle East. To this day, Bush's defenders insist he was the victim of bad intelligence. A more accurate description would be bad fiction.

The result? An unnecessary war that has killed more than 4,400 Americans and wounded almost 32,000. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi dead and millions displaced. An entire region destabilized, with Iran and ISIS left free to run amok. And it's not over — 11 U.S. soldiers have died there this year.

### A hard lesson

In an historic mea culpa, the New York Times later apologized to readers for its prewar Iraq coverage and disavowed Miller's reporting — much too late to avert the tragedy. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell has said he was duped into making the case for the war in front of the United Nations.

But many Americans still believe that Saddam had nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs, though none has ever been found.

The movie underscores the importance of fearless journalists who are willing to tell truth to power. They are part of the checks and balances on which this country was built.

"Today the press is under attack like never before, and democracy cannot survive without a free and independent press," said Rob Reiner, the movie's director, who portrays Walcott. "I hope Shock and Awe can serve as a cautionary tale of what's at stake for the survival of self-governance."

Jim Van Nostrand is editor of *The Daily Astorian*.

## SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

# Strange literary bedfellows

Philip Roth died in May at the age of 85, only a few months after the death of Ursula K. Le Guin, the former Cannon Beach resident and author of world acclaim.

Until their deaths, Roth and Le Guin had been the only living authors in the Library of America, a series "preserving the words that have shaped the American canon."

Both Le Guin and Roth would likely be uncomfortable with their sudden literary synchronicity.

In so many ways they were polar opposites: Le Guin a product of the Pacific Northwest; Roth, of the East Coast.

Le Guin was the daughter of academics, raised in Berkeley, California; Roth, from a middle-class family in the shadow of Newark, New Jersey.

Roth's fiction took place on earth; Le Guin's in other worlds.

Le Guin spent a long domestic life with her husband Charles and raised a family. Roth's serial relationships were fitful and occasionally troubled — his former wife, the actress Claire Bloom, wrote a savage accounting of their years together. He had no children.

In many of Le Guin's novels, she imagines a world without gender.

Philip Roth's voice is fixated on the roots of his desire.

In later years, Le Guin confronted the divide between herself and Roth with a painful assessment: "He's an awfully male writer," she told Literary Hub, the



**Ursula K. Le Guin**

Grove Atlantic literary news source. "It's sort of like he doesn't want me in his world."

### No labels

But it is their moment in time, in America, their passion for writing and uncanny ability to confound critics that ultimately make Roth and Le Guin part of a literary quilt.

Each found their voice and connected with the public in decades-long careers.

Their breakout novels — "Portnoy's Complaint" and Le Guin's "Left Hand of Darkness," came out the same year, 1969.

Le Guin was an unfashionable outsider from the East Coast literary

establishment. Both bristled at labels "Don't shove me into your pigeon-hole, where I don't fit, because I'm all over," she said in a 2014 interview.

Le Guin and Roth both viewed the art of storytelling with reverence, as prolific and highly regarded authors of essays and criticism.

The two authors each retreated from fashionable literary salons. Roth lived and wrote in a wooded rural town in Connecticut 100 miles from New York; Le Guin, in Portland and Cannon Beach.

Each often used their remote locations as backdrops for their fiction: Roth painting bucolic New England; Le Guin, the grandeur of the Oregon Coast.

In a 1973 essay, Salman Rushdie ascribes to each a shared literary device, the power of allegory: Roth, in "The Great American Novel"; Le Guin in "The Left Hand of Darkness."

Le Guin and Roth shared a kooky love of language and lingo, sometimes made up. Their love of words extended to tongues new and old: Le Guin's Hainish and the Hardic tongue of Earthsea. "Have you no harekki on Gont?" asks a character in "A Wizard of Earthsea."

Compare Roth's Yiddish, "Kish mir in tuchis" — which means what it sounds like.

### Voices for freedom

Le Guin and Roth came from a generation of progressive politics, secular outlook and rigid work ethic.

Intensely political, they pressed boundaries and hailed free expression.

Roth perceived the daily repression of Eastern European regimes, where writers feared for their safety and viewed their

example as a cautionary tale, identifying abusive political power "as immoral coercion." He helped bring writers like Milan Kundera and Bruno Schulz from behind the Iron Curtain to American readers.

Le Guin loathed intolerance, totalitarianism and repression. "Only fear rules men," a Le Guin character states in "The Left Hand of Darkness." "Nothing else works. Nothing else lasts long enough."

Le Guin's greatest moments in public life came from the podium. At the 2014 National Book Awards, she delivered a speech that resonated to not only the world of publishing, but politics, society and letters.

She urged an ascendancy of writers who can "remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality."

Both Le Guin and Roth were honored by the National Book Foundation with its Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, an honor bestowed on Saul Bellow, Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, Ray Bradbury, John Updike and Stephen King.

Neither received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Is there a nexus between them? Does there need to be one?

Roth supplies a better understanding of appreciating great authors in his essay, "Writing American Fiction" — "There seems to me little, in the end, to prove an assertion about the psychology of a nation's writers, outside, that is, of their books themselves."

R.J. Marx is *The Daily Astorian's* South County reporter and editor of *the Seaside Signal* and *Cannon Beach Gazette*.