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Media Misfires: Lessons from a Troubled Time

Speech by Jon Sawyer, Director of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

It's a great pleasure to be here, and such an elegant occasion. It was at a dinner nearly this elegant, not so far from here and some 30 years ago, that I first met Joe and Annie Schlafly. It happened that my wife's mother and Ellen Conant, Annie's mother, had mutual friends from college – and so Ellen and George organized what they called an “informal little dinner” to introduce us to St. Louis.

We were just a few months married then, and just a few months out of college -- and while I had what was to me the unbelievable job of Post-Dispatch editorial writer we nonetheless qualified for subsidized housing at the old Laclede Town townhouse apartments off Olive Street in midtown. At the time we didn't even have a car, and George Conant drove in from Ladue to pick us up, in a fire-engine-red Cadillac convertible. He had just outfitted the car with a Citizens Band radio, as I recall, and entertained us by chatting with truck drivers all the way home.

When we got to the house we discovered that the “informal little dinner” was a sit-down affair for 24, with something like six or seven courses and all served, so far as I can recall, on sterling silver. No one remarked on the fact that I was the only man present not in coat and tie. What I remember is the splendid toast by George Conant, all about St. Louis being the finest place imaginable and that everything possible would be done to make us feel welcome. “Except that I have to tell you this,” he added. “I have never allowed the Post-Dispatch in my yard --and I never will.”

I think George was exaggerating a little – he did that, on occasion – but all the same it was my introduction to one of the most fiercely competitive newspaper towns in America, where every day you had the opportunity to see how the world looked to one of the most conservative newspapers in America – and to one of the most liberal. That sort of competition was already gone in most cities, by the mid 1970s, and even in St. Louis the Post-Globe rivalry was a pale shadow of the raucous newspaper wars from a generation or two before. But it was a privilege all the same to start my career in a city where arguments mattered, and your perspective on events was challenged – and tested – every day.

What happened to that world? How did we get from there, to here?

Journalistically, the past three decades have been marked by two simultaneous but somewhat contradictory trends, neither of them conducive to an informed public or the furtherance of democracy.

On the one hand, there has been a growing consolidation of media ownership – a decline in the number of independent newspapers and of multiple-newspaper cities, the rise of the chains, and with them a precipitous drop in national and global reporting. On the other hand, there has also been the

fragmentation of the media market – the proliferation of lifestyle magazines, the advent of 100-channel cable television, on line blogging, and the rise in more ideologically defined media – from Fox News to NPR.

Old-line media like newspapers, shedding 3 to 4 percent of readers a year, for the most part still strive for objectivity. For them the new environment has meant instead an increasingly desperate focus on packaging, sensationalism and the “big story” – from O.J. Simpson to Monica Lewinsky to the quail Dick Cheney missed and the man he hit. There has been relentless pressure, beyond ideology, for the simplification of complex stories, for easy demonization and caricature in place of context, a herd approach to presenting the news instead of a search for deeper truths that valued the presentation of independent and contending voices.

I want tonight to address several specific examples of these trends, their impact on the quality of public discourse and the decisions we reach as a democracy.

Two of the examples concern the Iraq war – the period at the war’s outset when it was almost impossible to find any stories skeptical of the official government line and the period, more recently, when it has sometimes appeared that you could, with impunity, accuse the government of almost anything. The third is our coverage, often our mis-coverage, of all things Muslim – from that community’s first reaction to the 9/11 attacks to its response to the Iraq war, hyper aggressive prosecutions of suspected terrorists, the publication of those cartoons in Denmark and now, most recently, the furor over Dubai Ports World and the security of American ports.

Let me start with Iraq. I’m not going to focus tonight on Iraq today, skimming close to civil war and with two thirds of our own soldiers now saying, in a poll out today, that we should just get out. I’ve not been in Iraq since the start of the war and I don’t want to presume any special expertise on where we go now. I do believe that given all that has happened the past three years, the bloodshed and unintended consequences and for many the deep disappointments, it is all the more important to look back at the beginning, to learn what lessons we can in hopes that next time we will do better.

To set the scene let me make a clear acknowledgement – that the Bush administration is correct when it says that it was far from alone in misconstruing the nature and extent of Iraq’s effort to develop weapons of mass destruction. The view that Saddam was hell bent on developing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons was about as close to mainstream consensus as you’ll ever find in Washington

The Carnegie Endowment pounded that theme throughout the 1990s. The Brookings Institution’s Kenneth Pollack wrote a best-selling book contending that the war was essential, and just. The intelligence reports of our allies in Europe for the most part tracked our own assessments here.

Yet the fact that there was a consensus didn’t make the consensus correct – and the media very much let us down, public and policy makers alike, by not pressing harder to test the pre-war assumptions. Instead of probing for inconsistencies, testing the evidence, we became an echo chamber -- reflecting uncritically the views of administration officials, Iraqi exiles and others with a vested interest in bringing on the war.

Worse still, it was the most prestigious of our media outlets and personalities that led the way. Judy Miller's uncritical reporting of bogus claims as to Iraqi weapons programs will forever shame the New York Times – yet Tom Friedman's beating the drums for war in his columns and similar editorials in the Washington Post weren't much better.

The press corps as a whole enthusiastically embraced one of the most brilliant, slickest media manipulations in the annals of warfare – the Pentagon-approved “embedding” of hundreds of journalists in specific military units as those units prepared for war and then made their way to Baghdad. The public had never had such a vivid, real-time or front-row view of war – or one more blindered, constrained as it was by the convention of limiting each reporter to the particular unit with which he traveled. The inevitable identification with those units led to feature stories of poignance and power – but almost completely detached from the larger Iraqi context in which those military units moved. There were embedded reporters whose only encounter with actual Iraqis were those their units had captured or killed; little wonder, then, that the ebullient reporting from the first weeks of the war prepared us so poorly for the chaos and carnage to come.

One of the early critiques of embedding described the problem especially well. It was akin, this reporter wrote, to covering the war with a thousand straws – sucking up information from a host of highly specific locales but with no absolutely no sense of what the larger picture was like.

There were exceptions, reporting that burrowed into the lower ranks of the CIA and Pentagon and State Department where there were deep misgivings about the prevailing view. Among the best were stories in the fall of 2002 from the Knight-Ridder Washington bureau, contending that the case for Saddam Hussein's ongoing weapons programs was extraordinarily weak, for the most part based on defectors long absent from the country and evidence that was by then years old. But again, these were the exceptions, and rare – far more common, and influential, were stories like that which appeared on the New York Times front page in September 2002, asserting that Saddam's “dogged insistence” on pursuing WMD had brought the two countries to the brink of war – and warning, in the words of an unnamed administration official, that “the first sign of a ‘smoking gun’ may be a mushroom cloud.” Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney both used that phrase, and were later criticized for gratuitously inflaming public opinion – but it was the New York Times, our best newspaper, that put those incendiary words in circulation first.

If you look back at media coverage of Iraq in 2002 and early 2003 it's a blur of comparable exaggeration, mixed in with war preparations, escalating rhetoric and a thoroughgoing demonization of Saddam Hussein as a totalitarian megalomaniac on the scale of Stalin and Hitler. What you didn't see was much in the way of reporting from Iraq itself. No Americans were based in the country during 2002 and few were allowed even to visit, with the exception of one- or two-day excursions on the occasion of Saddam's birthday or for the sham plebiscite in which he received a nearly 100 percent endorsement.

The situation in Iraq looked rather different on the ground, as I discovered in May 2002 when I had the opportunity to spend two weeks traveling in central and southern Iraq. I managed to get a visa under the auspices of a St. Louis group called Veterans for Peace, ex-military guys opposed to the sanctions that had been imposed on Iraq following the first Gulf war because they saw them as affecting mostly innocent civilians, not Saddam's regime.

Going with a group like Veterans for Peace was the only way to make an extended visit to Iraq at the time. My expectations were low -- that I would not be permitted to talk with Iraqis away from government minders and that in any case, in Saddam Hussein's police state, few Iraqis would risk opening up to a stranger from abroad.

I was wrong. I found that I was allowed to walk freely through the streets, so far as I know unaccompanied. I was never hassled over the photographs I took and most of the people I encountered were remarkably free with their opinions, from the cab driver furious with Saddam's rich clique of cronies to the photo-shop owner who volunteered a damning summary of the cause of tensions between the United States and Iraq: "The only trouble," he said, "is our regime." The only thing that might unify the Iraqi people, many told me, was an army of foreign occupation.

As for Saddam, I was startled by the disconnect between the way he was being depicted in Washington and perceptions in Baghdad and around Iraq, where the general view was of a man despicable but in decline. The most vivid illustration of that for me was a musical spectacular that opened in Baghdad the week we were there. It was an epic glorifying Iraq's past, full of romance and battles, a cast of dozens -- and written by Saddam himself. I interviewed the director and leading actors, understandably nervous about the production -- and what the author might think. Yet when I went out to the auditorium -- this was in Iraq's National Theater, toward the end of the play's first week -- I was stunned to find the place just one third full. I asked the director what was going on and he shrugged his shoulders. "What can you say?" he said. "The public doesn't like it."

Think about it. Imagine George Bush or Bill Clinton putting on a vanity production here. Don't you think the party faithful could at least bus in a crowd? Was it really true, in 2002 or 2003, that Saddam Hussein was still a totalitarian threat? -- Or was he in the process of being contained and defanged, partly by the very process of UN inspections that our government and media so frequently disparaged?

On that same trip I visited Fallujah, 30 miles west of Baghdad, a place destined to become one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the American occupation. For me it has a different significance -- as the first place I encountered people cheering Osama bin Laden and the attacks of 9/11, and the place where I first thought hard about the roots of Muslim rage.

We spent the morning that day at the general hospital, a place that just a few months earlier had finally repaired the water treatment plant destroyed during the first Gulf War -- once again giving its patients and staff assured access to clean water.

I was walking afterward through the market area, several densely packed streets that seemed to specialize in electrical circuitry and masonry tile. I came across a bakery where the window was decorated with a smiling poster of Osama bin Laden. A group of neighborhood boys, noting my interest, crowded around the poster and mugged for my camera. None of them spoke English but they had no difficulty understanding "World Trade Center." When I said the word they burst into cheers, laughing as they gave me a thumbs-up sign of approval. They cheered again as I mimed what happened on Sept. 11, the two planes crashing into the twin towers.

It posed the question we had all faced for months: How can they hate us so? How could people far away be so cavalier about the loss of innocent lives? What was the source of such deep rage?

Fallujah, it turned out, was a place that knew something about cavalier attitudes, distant rage and the cost in innocent lives.

On Feb 13, 1991, in the fourth week of the U.S.-led air war against Iraq, a British Tornado warplane dropped a bomb that was intended to take out a key river bridge at Fallujah. The bomb veered 800 yards off target because of a faulty directional device, British officials later said, and landed in Fallujah's market instead. The civilian toll was 130 dead, according to Iraqi estimates later confirmed by human rights organizations and not disputed by British or U.S. officials.

The damage to civilians got scant coverage outside Iraq, either at the time or since. So did an even bigger incident that happened the same day – a U.S. attack on a bomb shelter in the al-Amiriya neighborhood of Baghdad that killed some 400 Iraqi women and children.

Few Americans have ever heard of the Fallujah Martyrs' Market. Few recall what happened at the al-Amiriya shelter. The boys in Fallujah, those unreflective followers of bin Laden? They know the stories well – just as now, I'm sure, they well know the stories of how, in 2004 and 2005, their town was turned to rubble.

What I'm describing is a moment that now feels long ago – a moment when President Bush's approval ratings hovered near 80 percent, when it was almost impossible to find any truly critical reporting or analysis on the war in the front pages of leading newspapers and magazines.

Flash forward a couple of years and you find the opposite extreme. In the place of credulousness, aggressive skepticism. Where once the media accepted the military's claim at face value – think of Jessica Lynch, that "heroic" rescue that was anything but -- now virtually anything was fair game, and sometimes the military didn't even get the chance to respond.

I understand how and why this happened – disclosures like the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, splashed on the world's consciousness just as the reality was sinking in that the much heralded "cakewalk" was turning into Don Rumsfeld's "long slog." In my view the military and the administration did a miserable job of handling Abu Ghraib and other issues of detainee treatment. As the Washington Post pointed out in a good editorial this morning, the only people who have been punished for Abu Ghraib to this day were the low-level guards who happened to show up in photographs. Interrogators implicated in actual deaths of detainees – there have been dozens – have so far gone free. So, with very rare exceptions, have those in the chain of command above. I also understand the media skepticism bordering on cynicism when it comes to military and administration claims as to "progress" in Iraq, the "good side" of the story that Fox News is constantly reminding us we aren't shown enough. There wasn't as much good news a year ago as administration supporters like to think; there's a good deal less today.

What I wasn't prepared for, however, was the firestorm of criticism – and misunderstanding – when the Post-Dispatch decided to investigate accusations of widespread atrocities against civilians by a former Marine sergeant. The sergeant, Jimmy Massey, came back from Iraq in 2004 and was quickly a fixture

on the anti-war circuit, testifying to civilians that he and his unit had gratuitously shot – as many as 30 in a single two-day period, he claimed, and as young as six, or four, depending on where he told the story.

Ron Harris, one of our Washington correspondents, came to me last fall and said Massey had just published a book in France, called “Kill! Kill! Kill!,” detailing his previous accusations and adding more. Ron also told me that Massey had been a member of the 1st Marines Division, part of the group with which Harris had been embedded at the start of the war. Ron said while in Iraq he and photographer Andrew Cutraro had witnessed – and reported on – instances in which the Marines had shot on civilians at checkpoints, by mistake. He said he was unaware of anything like the incidents Massey claimed, that the Marines themselves had investigated and dismissed the claims more than a year before.

Ron’s initial reaction was that Massey had little credibility and therefore wasn’t worth a story. I felt we had to pursue it, especially since Ron had been embedded with the First Division himself. If there was anything to Massey’s story, I felt we owed it to our readers to set the record straight. And if the claims were false, we owed even more a full accounting to Massey’s fellow Marines.

Ron then spent several weeks reporting, talking with many soldiers who had served with Massey as well as Massey himself, who acknowledged to Ron that he had no corroboration for his claims and that some of his own statements were false – such as the claim of killing 30 civilians in two time. Ron also discovered something else in the course of his work – that dozens of American newspapers had simply printed Massey’s allegations, without so much as calling the Marine Corps for a response. He interviewed a number of the editors involved, some of whom said they now had misgivings while others insisted there was no problem with giving Massey his say.

We ran the story in early November and all hell broke loose – especially on the blogs. Ron was denounced as a war hawk and the Post-Dispatch as the tool of a Bush administration plot to discredit any critics of the war. (I can scarcely imagine what George Conant would make of THAT.) Some newspapers, notably the Sacramento Bee, apologized for reporting Massey’s allegations; more stood by their stories.

What was striking to me, however, and why I retell this here, was the immediate assumption that we had an agenda in pursuing the story.

I guess in a way we did – to get at the truth of a difficult issue.

That ought to be our primary and most important role, and I believe, and yet increasingly it is a barely an afterthought. We in the media are consumed by so many concerns – falling circulation, collapsing ads, consolidation of ownership and loss of jobs – that perhaps it is no wonder we focus on the here and now, reader-friendly material and circulation-boosting sensation but all within the confines of what appears acceptable at the moment to the media herd. Contrarian voices, reporting on the obscure but important, journalism as education - -those are the dimensions of our work most in peril.

Many of us saw the 9/11 attacks as a wake-up call, a stark reminder to the public – and us – that we could not ignore the world beyond our shores, that we did so at our peril. Many newspapers around the country, among them the Post-Dispatch, dramatically increased their budgets and space for foreign

reporting. I spent the fall of 2001 in Central Asia, was in Sudan for a month in early 2002 and then reported later that year from Iraq, Turkey and Egypt. In the weeks before the war I toured Iraq and all the countries in the region, while two other sets of Post-Dispatch reporters and photographers embedded with troops and prepared to cover the war itself. I've done projects since in both Afghanistan and Iran.

But the interest in foreign coverage fell off nearly as quickly as it had arisen – not just at major regional newspapers like the Post-Dispatch but at the networks, magazines and bigger newspapers, too.

In the weeks before the 9/11 attacks the American media had been consumed with shark attacks in Florida and the disappearance and murder of California housewife Laci Peterson. Less than five years later sensation and trivia rule once more. For all the furor last year over Dan Rather's botched report on President Bush's National Guard service, or the New York Times' mishandling of the Valerie Plame case, the bigger story – at least to me – was the continued decline in serious news coverage.

Long-time CBS foreign correspondent Tom Fenton details these disheartening trends in his book "Bad News." He says that when he joined the network's Rome bureau in 1970 he was one of three full-time correspondents in that city alone – and part of a CBS global presence that included 14 major foreign bureaus, 10 mini-bureaus and stringers in 44 countries. Today the entire network consists of eight foreign correspondents and three bureaus. Four of the correspondents are based in London, he writes, where their job consists of doing voiceovers for videotape and wire reports others have compiled.

At the CBS of today, he writes, they "take it on trust. Don't shoot it, don't report it – just wrap it up and slap the CBS eye on it. And hope you won't notice the difference."

In 2004, meanwhile, the three networks together devoted 1,174 minutes – nearly twenty full hours – to missing women, all of them white.

It is in opposition to such trends – whistling in the wind, you might say – that we have established the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. It's an independent division of the Washington-based World Security Institute, created for the purpose of funding independent reporting on issues of global significance that have gone unreported, under-reported – or misreported – in the mainstream American media. We pay for the reporters' travel, and help them place the work – in newspapers and magazines, radio and television, the Internet. If we goad editors into funding more of such work themselves, so much the better – but in any case we aim to be part of improving the quality, and quantity, of public debate on America's role in the world.

As we discussed this project last fall with Emily Pulitzer, who along with other Pulitzer family members has made it possible, we talked about how this perpetuated a type of journalism the Pulitzers had always supported. I'm part of a long line of Post-Dispatch reporters sent out in the world. The Pulitzers didn't do it because reporting on Central America or Afghanistan or China added to circulation or brought in ads; I'm pretty sure that for the most part it didn't. I believe they did it because they thought it was important, because they wanted to have a voice in debate on national policy, and because they thought their public – their readers – needed to know.

In that sense it was pro bono journalism, of a sort that even the best of newspaper chains, shackled to the demands of investors and quarterly returns, are unlikely to pursue. Our hope is that non-profit journalism initiatives, like the Pulitzer Center, will continue that pro bono work in the years to come. I'm deeply grateful to Emmy for giving us the opportunity to try.

We have one project pending in southern Africa, examining the environmental consequences of human conflict, with a focus on the aftermath of civil wars in Mozambique and Rwanda and the current crisis in Zimbabwe. Another project focuses on east Asia, in particular countries like Australia and South Korea that are treaty partners with the United States but are increasingly drawn for reasons of trade and proximity to China.

I did the first project myself, a month's reporting in Sudan that included a week in Darfur. I focused on the role of the African Union there, tasked with keeping a peace that doesn't exist with too few troops and too little help, in the way of logistics and weaponry and communication, from the U.S. and other western powers. In an article for the Post-Dispatch and a short video for public television we tried to show that calls now for a transition to a United Nations force won't matter – unless matched by a commitment of real resources.

I mentioned at the beginning that I would talk about our coverage – sometimes miscoverage – of the Muslim community. I want to conclude with that, in part because it is hard to name an issue more important to us in so many ways – or one in which misunderstanding is so rife.

It happens that most of my reporting overseas since 9/11 has been in predominantly Muslim countries, and I'm sure that intensive contact with Muslim people, and Muslim perspectives, has colored my own views. So many of the Muslims I know are appalled by al Qaida and its ilk, by what extremists have done in the name of a great religion that shares so much with Judaism and Christianity. But they are also stunned, and hurt, by the hypocrisy in so much of what we say and do, and by our apparent inability to perceive the world as do they.

The last project I did for the Post-Dispatch was a series on Muslim communities, an attempt to cross that divide, which was published last December. I spent a week in Beirut, at a workshop with Middle Eastern journalists, and another week in Leeds, England, talking to Muslims in the community that had produced the suicide bombers who struck London last summer.

I wish that some of our policy makers – the ones so stunned by the Hamas victory in Palestinian elections, or the similar triumph by sectarian Shiite parties in the Iraqi election – had been with us in Beirut, where we met with Hamas leaders and toured Hezbollah fortifications on the Israeli border.

It appears to me, and certainly to my Middle Eastern colleagues, that Hamas and Shiite leaders like Muktada al Sadr in Iraq are simply repeating what Hezbollah did in Lebanon over the course of the past two decades: seize the moral high ground, at least as perceived by the local population, by leading resistance against an occupying force (the Israelis in Lebanon and in the West Bank, the Americans in Iraq), while at same time providing highly visible social services to most vulnerable and needy. It's a large part of why each of these movements has now been elected, democratically, to positions of

government authority – and it doesn't serve much purpose for us to assail them as terrorists beyond the pale of international discourse.

I think there are lessons to be drawn as well from the case of the Danish cartoons, the worldwide riots that ensued and now, hard on that controversy's heels, the made-in-Washington flap over giving management control of American ports to a Dubai-owned company.

Coverage of the cartoons issue consisted mostly of amazement, it seemed to me – amazement that a handful of crude cartoons in an obscure newspaper would occasion any notice, period, and then amazement that Islamic extremists could stoke the issue into demonstrations, the burning of embassies and the deaths of dozens – most recently in direct Christian-Muslim clashes in Nigeria. Too many commentaries portrayed this, I felt, as yet another confrontation between benighted Islam and the enlightened, secularized, free-thinking West – a confrontation, in other words, between free speech and prejudice.

The cartoons were first published in September. And certainly there were systematic efforts to exploit them by politically motivated Islamist groups. But there were real grievances too, grievances that went beyond the affront of portraying the Prophet with a bomb-shaped turban and that were shamefully unreported as the controversy spread. One of the most remarkable pieces of journalism I saw on this issue didn't appear until the 12th of this month, and then in an op ed piece in the New York Times. It was written by a Danish journalist, decrying his countrymen for decades of discrimination and outright harassment of their Muslim compatriots – who now make up some 200,000 out of Denmark's total population of 5 million.

I had followed this issue closely for months and yet it wasn't until this article appeared that I learned some important facts worth knowing. Among them: that mosque operations in Copenhagen had been restricted for 20 years and that Muslim cemeteries are banned as well, meaning that every pious Muslim must be flown abroad for proper burial. In Saudi Arabia such discrimination, directed against Christians and Jews, is worthy of media attention; in Europe, site of a growing anti-Muslim backlash, it apparently is not.

The other aspect of coverage of the cartoon controversy that I've found striking has been the self-congratulatory notice that confrontations have occurred throughout the world – with the exception, mostly, of America. It has been said that American Muslims are more assimilated, that America is more tolerant, and that is why we haven't seen riots or major demonstrations here.

I think that confidence may prove overstated, especially if we continue down the road we have followed since 9/11 or targeting Muslims and Arabs for "special" treatment – often, in practice, discrimination and harassment of the sort the rest of us would be outraged by if subjected to it ourselves.

My lesson in this came from spending most Fridays last fall at the Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, Va., the biggest mosque in the Washington area and a melting pot for Muslims from all over the world and the full spectrum of socio-economic status. What makes the place unique now, however, is that a significant number of its members have been targeted for prosecution as part of the most aggressive anti-terrorism program in the country – and virtually all of its members believe those prosecutions are unwarranted and grossly unfair.

I spent time in court as well, attending one of the trials and reviewing the records on others, and I came to the conclusion that in many of these cases the Muslim community had good grounds for concern.

Consider:

** One case rested entirely on a confession obtained while the suspect, a young American Muslim student, was in the custody of the Saudi security force – an entity our own State Department has repeatedly accused of torturing detainees.

** In another case a PhD cancer researcher, and Muslim imam, was sentenced to life in prison for speeches that were anti-American and incendiary – but that were not tied to any overt conspiracy to commit acts of violence.

** A third consisted of a group of men convicted of planning to fight – but not actually doing so – to help Kashmiri Muslims win independence from India. The Muslim group they supported was officially designated as a sponsor of terrorism – but the State Department didn't make that designation until December 2001, well after the contacts by the Virginia men that led to their prosecution.

Those convicted insisted that they had never intended to fight against the United States, and the government never presented any physical evidence linking them to such a plot. Eight of the 11 initial defendants held to that position throughout, despite heavy pressure from prosecutors and the promise of major reductions in their sentences if they declared the existence of such a plan. Three of those charged agreed to the prosecutors' offer, and their claim of a larger, anti-American plot proved crucial in the convictions the government won in six of the remaining cases.

Last week the judge in the case, acting at the behest of prosecutors, made good on the deal, ruling that two of the cooperators will now go free. As for those convicted, they are serving terms that range from 15 years to life.

Among the convicted was Randall "Ismail" Royer, who grew up in St. Louis and converted to Islam at the age of 19. I spent time with his Bosnian wife and four children, and his parents, who moved to Falls Church from Missouri to help with the children.

I've also been corresponding with Royer himself, a highly articulate man who has been denied visitors at his medium-security Pennsylvania prison but who maintains an active correspondence with people outside.

I would like to close with his account, in a letter to me, of what happened to him and his friends, and why, in his view, Americans should pay attention. It's his side of a story that is complicated, no doubt, and subject to much debate. What's worth noting is that in his community, of American Muslims, it's taken as a simple statement of fact.

"What you have is a passel of prosecutors and FBI agents who are taking advantage of post-9/11 hysteria to build their careers," Royer wrote. "The outcome of these cases is predetermined by judges who are submissive to the administration and a jury pool ready to believe the worst about Muslims.

“Many of us laughed when we were arrested and saw these indictments, and read the overblown language with which our legitimate activities were described, and the wild claims of cooperating defendants. But none of us is laughing now, and indeed the wilder the accusations, the more likely, it seems, a Muslim will be convicted.

“This is not to say that there are not Muslims in the world who are dangerous to U.S. security. But we just were not those people.

“I think the American people need to be concerned because once the system is bent to start putting a minority in prison, the system stays bent. If they can search my house without a warrant, they can do that to you, too. If they can say that a book that I had or a newsletter I started were overt acts in a criminal conspiracy, they can do that to anyone.”

The purpose of journalism isn't to justify such views, or to take them at face value. But we do have an obligation to tell their stories, to make the realities perceived by them visible to the broader public. And too often, since 9/11, those views have been either caricatured in the media, or completely ignored.

On that rather somber note, I'll stop. Thanks again to you all, for letting me share this evening, and these concerns, about a craft I love. If there are questions, on any of these issues or beyond, I would welcome further discussion.