

## **MEDIA ARROGANCE: UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL**

In his book "Why America Hates the Press," author Jim Fallows describes a press panel at Montclair State College in the late '80s. CBS correspondent Mike Wallace was asked, if he were embedded with enemy soldiers and came upon a small group of American soldiers about to be ambushed, would he try to warn the Americans? "No," Wallace said. "You don't have a higher duty. No. No. You're a reporter!"

Fallows says George Connell, a Marine colonel in attendance that evening, hypothesized that if Wallace was wounded by stray fire, the troops that he would have let be ambushed would risk their lives dragging his sorry butt (my words, not Fallows') to safety, rather than leaving him to bleed to death on the battlefield. Evidently, members of our military have a "higher duty" than does Mike Wallace.

Last month, Eason Jordan, chief news executive of CNN, blithely asserted that American troops were targeting journalists in Iraq and deliberately killing them. This was not the first time he had made such unsubstantiated accusations. This time his loose lips cost him his job.

Dan Rather has stepped down as CBS anchor without accepting full responsibility for falsified documents intended to do a "gotcha" on President George W. Bush just before the presidential election, concerning his time — or lack thereof — in the Texas Air National Guard.

Over the years, I have seen more examples of this kind of self-righteous arrogance by the media than I have space to list them, but you get the point. The question is: Where does this arrogance originate? I recently found the answer up close and personal, after addressing graduating seniors at my beloved Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia, a place from which I was graduated and to which I have given as much time and money as I could spare over the past four decades.

Following the speech, I left the stage shaking hands with the Grady faculty assembled there until I reached Professor Conrad Fink. Fink refused my hand repeatedly. Why? He said I had "insulted" him. What had I done? I had disagreed with him. Since when is a difference of opinion an insult? Evidently, when you are Conrad Fink.

I took public exception to Fink's comments in the Athens Banner-Herald a couple of years ago that our government was not sharing enough information with the news media (including, I assume, those who would sell out our troops and/or accuse them of crimes they haven't committed) on plans to flush out terrorists and that the American public wrongly supported that strategy. This was barely two months after the terrorist attacks. It was — and remains — my opinion that what the American public really wants is for the government to catch the bad guys. How they do it is up to them, not Mike Wallace, CNN or Professor Conrad Fink.

When I wrote that column, I truly believed Fink, who came to the Grady College from Associated Press and has won a number of teaching awards, would invite me to share a cup of coffee and show me the error of my ways, or allow me to give him another perspective. We would agree, or we would agree to disagree and part friends. Color me naïve.

Fink's apologists chalk up his boorish behavior toward me as "academic freedom." Oh, please. Since when do bad manners qualify as academic freedom? Maybe the better answer is that Fink can't abide a former corporate robber baron having the audacity to disagree publicly with him. It is that kind of arrogance that fosters the know-it-all mentality of the national media who look down their noses at talk radio, Fox News Network and Internet bloggers, while continuing to lose readers and viewers.

I don't really care what Professor Fink thinks of me (I think I know), but I do care if he is appliquéing his we-are-morally-superior attitude on tomorrow's journalists. Their world is going to be complicated enough without adopting a closed mind and a thin skin toward anyone who disagrees with them. After having witnessed the professor's petulance up close and personal, I'm not encouraged.