

by Glenn Greenwald

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Iranian guards, in December 2011, with the US RQ-170 Sentinel drone they claim to have brought down electronically. Photograph: AFP/Getty Image

Barbara Starr, CNN's Pentagon reporter (more accurately known as: the Pentagon's reporter at CNN), has an exciting exclusive today. Exclusively relying upon "three senior officials" in the Obama administration (all anonymous, needless to say), she claims that "two Iranian Su-25 fighter jets fired on an unarmed US Air Force Predator drone in the Persian Gulf last week," while "the drone was in international airspace east of Kuwait . . . engaged in routine maritime surveillance." The drone was not hit, but, says CNN, "the incident raises fresh concerns within the Obama administration about Iranian military aggression in crucial Gulf oil shipping lanes."

First things first: let us pause for a moment to extend our thoughts and prayers to this US drone. Although it was not physically injured, being shot at by the Iranians - while it was doing nothing other than peacefully minding its own business - must have been a very traumatic experience. I think I speak on behalf of everyone, regardless of political views, when I say that we all wish this brave hero a speedy recovery and hope it is back in full health soon, protecting our freedom.

The CNN report on this incident is revealing indeed. Every paragraph - literally - contains nothing but mindless summaries of the claims of US government officials. There is not an iota of skepticism about any of the assertions, including how this incident happened, what the drone was doing at the time, or where it took place. It is pure US government press release - literally; I defy anyone to identify any differences if the US government had issued its own press release directly rather than issuing it masquerading as a leaked CNN report.

Most notably, CNN does not even bother with the pretense of trying to include the claims of the Iranian government about what happened. There is no indication that the self-described news outlet even made an effort to contact Tehran to obtain their rendition of these events or even confirmation that it occurred. It simply regurgitates the accusations of anonymous US officials that Iran, with no provocation, out of the blue decided to shoot at a US drone in international airspace. (Although CNN does not mention it, last December Iran shot down a US drone which, it claims (and the US does not deny) was in Iranian air space).

That CNN's prime mission is to serve the US government is hardly news. But given the magnitude of these kinds of accusations - their obvious ability, if not intent, to bolster animosity on the part of the US public toward Iran and heighten tensions between the two nations - shouldn't CNN at least pretend to be a bit more skeptical and even-handed about how it is reporting these claims? Anonymous Bush officials claim Saddam is reconstituting his nuclear program; anonymous Obama officials claim Iran illegally shot at a US drone for no reason.

But nothing can top this sentence from CNN, intended to explain the significance of this alleged event: "Iran has, at times, been confrontational in the region." Yes, indeed they have - in stark contrast to the peaceful United States, which never is. Or, as Jeremy Scahill put it today, anticipating how Starr might present her report on-air on CNN later today: "Iran, which has launched airstrikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and [holding earpiece] -- wait, what's that, Wolf? Oh, right. The US, which has..." Scahill was being a bit generous to Wolf Blitzer there, who would be far more likely to add; "yes, that's right, Barbara: and we should also remind our viewers how Iran, just a few short years ago, attacked its neighbor Iraq, destroyed the country,

and then occupied it for almost a decade, showing how aggressive the mullahs are willing to be in this region."

In case any of you thought the US media would change its future behavior in light of the debacle during the run-up to the Iraq War - and, really, were any of you thinking they would? - this is your answer. The pre-Iraq-War behavior wasn't an abandonment of their purpose but the supreme affirmation of it: to drape the claims of the US government with independent credibility, dutifully serve its interests, and contrive an appearance of a free press. This is our adversarial, watchdog media in action.

Iranian evil

This all reminds me of a debate I did a couple years ago on MSNBC with Arianna Huffington and the Washington Post's Jonathan Capehart over Iran and whether it should be viewed as an aggressor and enemy of the US. For most of the debate, MSNBC kept showing scary video footage of a test of a mid-range missile which Iran had just conducted, and then Capehart picked up on that to tell me, in essence: how can you say Iran isn't aggressive when they're testing these missiles? Yes, because, clearly, countries of peace (such as the US and Israel) would never do something as belligerent as testing missiles, much like no real Country of Peace would ever want to acquire a nuclear weapon.