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U.S. Propaganda Disguised as Journalism

By Alexei Pushkov

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The Manhattan District Attorney Office's criminal case against Dominique Strauss-Kahn has all but collapsed after the prosecution itself acknowledged that it did not trust the testimony of the 32-year-old woman who claimed Strauss-Khan sexually attacked her.

Since Strauss-Kahn's arrest in mid-May, the alleged victim has undermined her own case by repeatedly lying to a grand jury and to prosecutors. But perhaps the worst blow to her case was the taped telephone conversation she had with an incarcerated man in which she discussed how they could benefit financially fr om accusing the wealthy Strauss-Kahn of raping her. What's more, investigators have found no forensic evidence whatsoever that a nonconsensual sexual attack occurred.

Nonetheless, Strauss-Kahn's reputation has been permanently tarnished and his career ruined, particularly after footage of him in handcuffs being escorted by police was shown all over the world. Americans like to explain the notorious tradition of "perp walks" in which television cameras show defendants being escorted — usually in handcuffs if the criminal

accusation is for a violent crime — during their arraignment as part and parcel of their open, free democratic society. In the most democratic judicial system in the world, we are told, the people have a fundamental right to see on television who has been charged with a serious crime. After all, when the U.S. government brings a criminal case against a defendant, it is a crime against society.

This sounds wonderful in theory, but in reality — as the Strauss-Kahn fiasco clearly showed — the perp walk de facto destroys the very presumption of innocence that serves as the foundation of the U.S. legal and criminal systems. He was publicly demeaned and humiliated — and considered guilty by millions of viewers all over the world.

Many Americans and U.S. institutions were disgraced by this case. This includes the judge, who, clearly acting on emotions and not evidence, ruled that Strauss-Kahn should be kept in pretrial detention alongside hardened criminals instead of being freed on bail. It also includes the investigators and Manhattan district attorney, who did not fairly weigh the evidence and were all too quick to arrest Strauss-Kahn in their hot pursuit of making headlines by catching a big fish. They once again sought to show the world how democratic the U.S. legal system is. After all, everyone is equal under the law, right?

The U.S. media were also disgraced. Although they love to proclaim themselves the most objective, independent and fairest in the world, there are hundreds of cases besides the Strauss-Kahn incident that prove the opposite. Remember, for example, how the U.S. media unanimously supported the NATO bombing of Belgrade in the late 1990s. Or how they so eagerly signed onto the U.S. government's assertions that Saddam Hussein had nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Or how, as if by command from above, the U.S. media attack a newly designated enemy of the United States, such as Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein or Moammar Gadhafi.

Take The New York Times, which is rightfully considered the best newspaper in the United States. Columnist Maureen Dowd in her May 18 essay "Powerful and Primitive" attacked Strauss-Kahn as if he was Charles Manson. First, Dowd describes the "hard-working, God-fearing, young widow who breaks her back doing menial labor at a Times Square hotel to support her teenage daughter, justify her immigration status and take advantage of the opportunities in America."

And this "God-fearing widow," Dowd writes, "was attacked by a crazed, rutting, wrinkly old satyr charging naked out of a bathroom, lunging at her and dragging her around the room, caveman style."

The dramatic story of "a modest, hard-working widow" and "an old wrinkled satyr" was replayed over and over in the U.S. mass media to the point of becoming an obsession. It was even more dramatic when this hyped-up global sensation came to a halting crash as soon as it was discovered that the woman's testimony was false.

But this isn't simply stupidity, hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness. Dowd's column, like many others, is full of contempt for "lustful European politicians" who tried to defend Strauss-Kahn. Her column is also dripping with the sacred, ultra-patriotic belief in U.S. superiority over the rest of the world as she gloats over its so-called democracy and egalitarian legal system.

“This story,” writes Dowd, “serves as an inspiring example that in America even a maid can permit herself to have pride and the right to be heard — when she is condemned by one of the most powerful men in the world, that he is in fact a predator.”

In reality, this is a story about a banal, deplorable attempt to blackmail a wealthy man and deceive the public — an attempt that received enormous support from the media during the beginning of the scandal.

The biased coverage of the Strauss-Kahn case on The New York Times’ opinion page was not lim ited to Dowd. In his May 31 column, “DSK and Conspiracy Theories,” columnist Roger Cohen also expressed no doubt of Strauss-Kahn’s guilt. For Cohen, it was “a young African woman’s voice raised against violent abuse by the powerful.” But before she proudly raised her voice, the young African woman decided to ask her curator in jail how much money she could earn from Strauss-Kahn.

The Strauss-Kahn arrest corresponded in a curious way with the fierce political battle in France for the presidency and the future of the dollar as a reserve currency and the future of IMF policy. But for the overwhelming majority of U.S. newspaper columnists and television commentators, none of this was important. It is much more important to sweep away all doubts and questions in this case for the sake of declaring — yet again — the unyielding righteousness of the United States and its superiority over the rest of the world. Is this journalism or propaganda?

Russian journalism, despite what people say and write about it in the United States, is much more distrustful of statements made by authorities. Largely because of the Soviet legacy, Russians are more skeptical than Americans of the government’s version of events. On the whole, Russians better understand that there are two sides to every scandal. In this sense, Russian journalists seem to be more open-minded than U.S. journalists, who are all too eager to believe that a “God-fearing maid,” thanks to America’s democracy, stood up to one of the world’s most powerful men.

From the very beginning, Russians viewed the allegations against Strauss-Kahn with great suspicion. Likewise, most Russians do not believe for one second that John F. Kennedy was killed by a lonely maniac. Or that the reason the United States invaded Iraq was because Saddam Hussein supposedly had weapons of mass destruction. It would seem that both Russian media and society have a better ability to put together facts and come up with logical conclusions from the story that is unfolding.

Similarly, Russians also do not believe that former President Boris Yeltsin was a “democrat” whose rule benefited the country, although this is the official version that is eagerly supported by the West. It was telling that when President Dmitry Medvedev unveiled a statue in Yekaterinburg in February in honor of Yeltsin, only a handful of local citizens were present for the ceremony. The Russian media have a number of weaknesses, but political correctness is certainly not one of them.

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