LEADING TO THE 2003 IRAQ WAR

THE GLOBAL MEDIA DEBATE

EDITED BY
ALEXANDER G. NIKOLAEV AND
ERNEST A. HAKANEN

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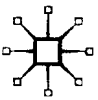

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Contents

Part II The Global Debate

Europe

The Middle East

Eurasia

Across the Globe

List of Graphs and Tables

Graphs

Tables

Introduction

Ernest A. Hakanen and Alexander G. Nikolaev

This volume is an edited book about the global media coverage of the coming of the 2003 Iraq war, written by media scholars from around the world. The main emphasis of the volume is the prewar media debate in different countries on whether to support or oppose the 2003 Iraq war.

The year leading up to the Iraq war witnessed a barrage of reasons to go to war given by the U.S. Administration, some reasonable, some unreasonable, some valid, some invalid, some factual, and some fictional. Reasons given for war changed almost daily. Americans and people around the world were undoubtedly confused. And the media clearly contributed to the confusion.

The Importance of the Event

The days leading to the 2003 Iraq war became an important moment in the history of international relations of the post–World War II era. For the first time since 1945, the doctrine of the preemptive war was not only openly proclaimed by the United States but actually put to practical use, encountering stiff political resistance even from its traditional allies and neighbors—France, Germany, Canada, Mexico, and others. It is not an exaggeration to say that the entire international security system was tested by this event. The future and the relevance of the United Nations—as a cornerstone of this system—were challenged by this war. Therefore, this event is being and will be thoroughly studied by scholars from different fields to assess the effects and future political consequences of this war. Since the media played an important role in the entire event, the analysis of the global media debate of this war is important and enlightening.

The Course and the Essence of the Debate

On January 29, 2002 President George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union Address, which would be later called the "*Axis of Evil*" speech.

A.G. Nikolaev et al. (eds.), *Leading to the 2003 Iraq War*

President Bush for the first time revealed a new doctrine of preemptive action against America's enemies: "I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer."[1] A phrase from that speech—"The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons"—became the slogan for the entire anti-Iraq campaign.

The first media stories on serious preparations for war against Iraq didn't appear until April 2002. On April 28, The *New York Times* published an article "U.S. envisions blueprint on Iraq including big invasion next year."[2] At the same time, not only ordinary Americans but even many well-informed American journalists covering the White House kept asking the same question: "So what is President Bush's rationale?"[3]

Initially, the rationale for the war was in complete accordance with the slogan of the campaign: the presence in Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. Later, however, the scope of the threat was seemingly expanded. Iraq was said to present a threat not only to the United States, but also to its allies and interests in the region as well as to the world peace in general. There were also many attempts to connect Iraq to Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. President Bush presented these arguments for the first time in his September 12 speech to the UN General Assembly and later in his October 7 speech in Cincinnati:[4]

> In the attacks on America a year ago, we saw the destructive intentions of our enemies. This threat hides within many nations, including my own. In cells, in camps, terrorists are plotting further destruction and building new bases for their war against civilization. And our greatest fear is that terrorists will find a shortcut to their mad ambitions when an outlaw regime supplies them with the technologies to kill on a massive scale. In one place and one regime, we find all these dangers in their most lethal and aggressive forms [Iraq]. . . .[5]

But the very next day after the Cincinnati speech, the CIA released a document that directly contradicted the President. The report said, "Saddam is not a threat to the United States right now, but that the easiest way for him to become an immediate threat is to give him no options. Bush could well provoke the use of the very weapons he is trying to prevent."[6] *Newsweek* and *MSNBC* reported that intelligence pictures used by President Bush to support his case "were not convincing."[7] In addition, the 9/11 report did not support an Iraqi–Al Qaeda connection. *MSNBC* reported, "U.S. intelligence officials told NBC News the actual links between Saddam and Al Qaeda are sketchy. In fact, they believe Osama bin Laden views Saddam as too secular, not a true believer, and in some ways a threat to Islam."[8] In that same article, it was revealed that the Prague meeting between September 11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi spy, cited by

Cheney, never happened and that the President knew it. The *Washington Post* reported that "senior intelligence officials" told them that "the CIA had not found convincing proof, despite efforts that included surveillance photos and communication intercepts," of any connection between "Hussein and global terrorism."[9]

Considerable tensions started to form within the Bush administration between the "hawks" (Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz) and the "internationalists" (Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, and Richard Haas).[10] And Bush sided with the hawks. However, his choice only energized the internal opposition and gave birth to what the British *Guardian* dubbed the "intelligence war."[11] "The past week has witnessed a behind-the-scenes revolt by U.S. intelligence and other government employees in sensitive positions, against the White House and Pentagon over the use of classified information about Saddam Hussein's activities."[12] "Officials in the CIA, FBI and energy department are being put under intense pressure to produce reports which back the administration's line, the Guardian has learned. In response, some are complying, some are resisting and some are choosing to remain silent."[13]

Bush did not have to fight for public support. The *Washington Post* and *USA Today* polls show that the level of public support for a military action against Iraq stayed at a steady 57–58 percent between early August and late November of 2002.[14] At the same time the American public assumed that Bush would get support from the United Nations and European allies. When that did not pan out, Bush's position on Iraq met a very active and widespread expression of public opposition in the form of antiwar rallies conducted all over the U.S. in January 2003. Ignoring international support and protests at home, the United States attacked Iraq on March 19, 2003.

Main Emphasis of the Volume

The months leading up to the 2003 Iraq war have become blurred in society's collective mind. It's important to note how the orchestration of arguments contradicted the facts and, often times, common sense. In this volume, we are concerned with illuminating these problems. However, we are specifically concerned with the months leading up to the war because once a war begins all history leading up to it is immediately based on the war itself, in other words the cause is explained by the effect. As William Dorman points out in chapter one, "the myth of war, once a war starts, has a power to overwhelm culture and public discourse, and therefore take over thought. Most of the arguments for or against war usually occur after the war has begun and will be in vain because rallying effects will win out." Therefore, our first purpose is to examine the actual reasons and arguments for war against Iraq

as they were reflected in the prewar phase of the media debate. When a war or a conflict starts—the free and diverse media debate usually ends. But at the prewar stage the opposition is still vocal and not suppressed and the media deliberations are usually quite diverse and informative—not blurred by the rallying effects.

Our second purpose is to examine real reasons why certain countries supported or opposed the war. The national prewar debate within each country on the issue was inevitably reflected in each country's media. Consequently, if we look at the arguments used by the representatives of different nations for or against the war—we can understand the reasons behind their political stance on the issue and how and why their positions were formed. This kind of exploration will provide us with a deep insight into each nation's pattern of political reasoning. For many readers this material may be quite enlightening because for the first time they will be able to see the actual reasons behind other countries' actions and not the motives assigned or attributed (often falsely) to those countries by the domestic media seen by people within their own countries' borders.

Features and Structure of the Book

The structure and composition of the book reflect its main emphasis and purpose. First of all, this book will systematically cover the entire world. In this volume, the editors make sure that every corner of the Globe is covered. This is important in order not to get trapped in a traditional Eurocentric point of view and to show viewpoints of people living on all the continents of the Globe.

The second important feature of the book is that this volume is a collection of scholarly articles—not political essays. It became fashionable to publish collections of essays, that is, basically, the collections of personal political opinion pieces. This volume is a collection of scholarly research articles. There are no political favorites—countries that supported the war (United States of America, Great Britain, Spain, Australia, and Israel) are represented as well as the countries that opposed the war (France, Germany, Russia, China, Mexico, and the Arab countries). The main idea of the volume is to show and compare as objectively as possible all the types of arguments used throughout the world for as well as against the war. Although some contributions may have some small political biases, as a volume, this book does not have any political agenda.

Finally, only original articles—specifically written for the book—are included in this volume. The reader will be reading only original pieces of research not found anywhere else and not published previously anywhere.

Structurally, this book is divided into two parts. Part one is a collection of examinations of the media coverage of the days leading to war in the United States, Britain, and Australia—the core of "the coalition of the willing." Part two examines the global media outside this English-speaking alliance.

In the United States, the media did more than merely report the political events and actions. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the media were slow to react, uncritical, some times ignorant, and often misleading. In many ways, the media are as culpable as the U.S. administration for Americans' confusion.

The second part of the book—The Global Debate—is structured not according to the pro-counter criterion but territorially: Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East, and the rest of the world. This type of structure allows for clear coverage of all the corners of the world, helps to avoid political grouping of the countries (pro- versus anti-), and, consequently, helps to tone down possible political undertones. In some cases, countries that supported and opposed the war are included in one chapter (for example, Mexico and Spain). This allows us to closely and objectively compare arguments highlighted in different countries as well as to highlight territorial and cultural similarities and differences in the patterns of political reasoning among different nations.

In general, it is important to examine the global media in their own right. First, we can learn what arguments for and against possible involvement in the war panned out in each country. Second, the international community through the UN did not support the war. Therefore, an examination of the rest of the world shows how the U.S. actions were seen vis-à-vis international relations.

Finally, the editors wish to thank Douglas Porpora, and Ronald Bishop, both of Drexel University for their support of this project. We also would like to thank Anthony Wahl and Heather Van Dusen of Palgrave Macmillan whose support and professionalism were invaluable in bringing this book into existence.

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13. J. Borger, "White House 'Exaggerating Iraqi Threat,' " *Guardian Unlimited*, Wednesday, October 9, 2002 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,807286,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2005).
14. Poll numbers showing the level of public support for the war in the United States in 2002: August—57% (*Washington Post*); September—5–57% (*Washington Post*); September—23–57% (*USA Today*); November—58% (*USA Today*).

Part I

The English-Speaking Western Alliance—America, Great Britain, and Australia

Chapter One

A Debate Delayed Is a Debate Denied: U.S. News Media before the 2003 War with Iraq

William A. Dorman

There is no action of the state that can have a more immediate or dramatic impact on the lives of its citizens than the use of military force against an external foe: real or imagined. Consequently, in a democracy, public debate matters most over the question of whether to wage a war. I begin with two central propositions, the first and most important of which is that once a war begins critical thinking in any society, free or not, becomes virtually impossible. The thoughtful consideration of alternatives simply is unacceptable, suffocated as it were by nationalism and patriotism, not to mention fear and rage. The veteran war correspondent and journalist Chris Hedges has persuasively shown in his book, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*,[1] that the price we pay is the smothering of debate. Hedges learned this first-hand, when he shared with his audience his profound doubts about warfare and its effects on the civil voice in a college commencement address in spring 2003, just after the initial stage of the most recent war with Iraq had ended—and was promptly booed from the stage.

Given this, the only meaningful time to debate the need for war is before one begins; it is too late once it is under way. History is abundantly clear that the myth of war, once a war starts, has a power to overwhelm culture and public discourse, and therefore takes over thought to an extraordinary degree.

The second key proposition here is that the press is the only institution that can reasonably be expected to make possible a robust debate over foreign policy, in general, and the war option, in particular, in a timely enough way to make a difference in the choices made by policy elites. At least in theory, news-gathering organizations have the resources, both

A.G. Nikolaev et al. (eds.), *Leading to the 2003 Iraq War*

human and material, and the philosophic mission to investigate claims to truth by the state about the need for war, and are unfettered by either external government controls or (again, in theory) the concerns of partisan politics that limit other institutions, particularly Congress.

The general public, by contrast, has neither the inclination nor the wherewithal, for the most part, to open a genuinely serious debate on its own. At the same time, neither *non*mainstream media (e.g., public broadcasting, quality periodicals such as The *New Yorker* or small circulation opinion journals such as The *Nation*, the Internet, and so on) nor nonelite dissenting groups, think tanks, or academic specialists alone or in combination are sufficient for the task of creating a critical mass of doubt about official Washington's analysis sans questions about the policy options raised in the mainstream news media. To be sure, if a war goes on long enough, as did the Vietnam War, or a conflict is sustained at an obviously increasing cost and seems to have derailed, as is now the case of the American occupation of Iraq, the public can become alarmed and, eventually, a free-swinging debate can open up—but this almost always occurs long after terrible damage has been done. It is in this regard that a debate *following* a war is a case of too little far too late.

It was during the run-up to the war with Iraq that an authentic debate mattered most, the most critical time for a national discussion in which all sides could have had equal voice. Yet, as I hope to make plain, the press for a range of reasons failed to function, as democratic theory promises, and its passivity helped contribute to what arguably is a foreign policy fiasco of an unusual dimension.

The Press and an Ill-Informed Public

Never before in the annals of contemporary American foreign policy was so much evidence accumulated so quickly that the assumptions leading to a war were so questionable. Almost as soon as the president declared victory, the chaos and daily violence began on the ground in post-invasion Iraq and the failure of the U.S. military to find Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) quickly became an embarrassment. Added to the mix, as time passed, were the final reports of David Kay, the administration's chief weapons inspector, the insider account of Richard Clarke, onetime White House's staff expert on terrorism, and the reports of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the 9/11 commission. The only matter left in dispute by the summer of 2004 was whether President Bush and his advisors had *knowingly* misled Congress and the American people about the reasons for going to war.

As to how the press figures into all of this, the chain of logic is simple. Under democratic theory, a privately owned press unrestrained by government

provides for a free-marketplace of ideas that makes it possible for *citizens* (as opposed to subjects) to debate alternatives, become aware of abuses of state power, and, ultimately, *hold government accountable*.

Understood in these terms, the *informed* consent of the governed is impossible without the mechanism of a free press. In the realm of foreign affairs, where under usual circumstances Americans tend to be least well informed and least interested, the press has a particularly important role to play, given the dynamics of the media's agenda-setting capacity and its power of representation. In other words, the media—especially television news—acts as the daily textbook for most Americans on what is happening in the world. In this sense, it provides the public with an agenda of concerns (e.g., Iraq versus Sudan), a vocabulary (e.g., "freedom fighters" versus "terrorists," or "peace process" versus "negotiated sellout"), and a sense of what dangers we face and from whom.

What Americans "learned" from the mainstream press in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war had everything to do with what they came to *believe*. Couple this "learning curve" with other factors, not the least of which was Congressional passivity demonstrated most dramatically by the October 10–11, 2002 votes of both houses to approve the force resolution, and it was a relatively easy task for the Bush administration to go forward with its plans for war without fear of serious opposition from the general public.

The problem, of course, is that so much of what Americans came to believe was wrong. In this regard, I think the problem is not that the public is uninformed during times of international crisis, as so many observers lament, but rather that they are *ill informed*.

The study that most clearly demonstrated the gulf between "belief" and "knowledge"—a huge distinction always to keep in mind when thinking about any issue—was conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in conjunction with Knowledge Networks.[2] The study was usefully discussed in the Winter 2003–04 issue of *Political Science Quarterly* by three of its principals.[3]

The PIPA surveys conducted before, during, and even after the war found that a significantly high percentage (in some instances as high as 68 percent) of Americans accepted one or more of the three most compelling administration claims, all of which were false.

The first "misperception" in the words of the survey, and the most important in a post–9/11 world in the American political context, was that there was a demonstrated connection between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Al Qaeda, and that Iraq had played a key role in planning September 11. The second, very nearly equal in importance, is that Hussein possessed WMD. And the third misperception was that the war had international legitimacy, which is to say the support of world opinion, when the opposite was true.

Most significantly, the surveys demonstrated that there was a high correlation between this tendency toward misperception and Americans' support for the war, and, equally important these surveys provided evidence about the role played by the news media in giving currency to the false beliefs.

Most disturbingly, long after the war had ended and unbridled patriotism presumably had long since ebbed, not to mention that such experts on terrorism and WMDs as Richard Clarke, David Kay, and Hans Blix had been heard from at length, the false beliefs persisted. Almost a year after the major combat had ended, PIPA issued a follow-up study that indicated, despite an overabundance of evidence to the contrary, that a majority of Americans (57 percent) continued to believe that Saddam's Iraq had provided significant support to Al Qaeda. Of this, 20 percent believed Iraq was directly connected to the events of September 11, while 45 percent said they believed evidence of support for Al Qaeda had actually been found during the war. The results for belief about WMDs were quite similar.[4]

Why a sizeable percentage of Americans should persist in their mistaken beliefs about Saddam Hussein's connection to terrorism and the threat he posed to American security is not particularly difficult to comprehend. Once people have won a military victory in a war that they strongly believed was fought for honorable purpose and in the interests, indeed, of national survival, it will take far more than evidence after the fact to change their minds. In other words, it is not unusual that a large number of Americans should seek to avoid a kind of collective cognitive dissonance by holding on to false beliefs, which is yet another reason why the press needs to challenge such beliefs *before* a war begins, not after.

On the evidence included in studies such as those undertaken by PIPA as well as others to be discussed shortly, there is little to dispute the judgments of Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis that what "is worrisome is that it appears that the President has the capacity to lead members of the public to assume false beliefs in support of his position"[5] while at the same time "the media cannot necessarily be counted on to play the critical role of doggedly challenging the administration."[6] And, as the authors had observed earlier, there is striking evidence "that the readiness to challenge the administration is a variable that corresponds to levels of misperception among viewers,"[7] and I would hasten to add, presumably readers.

The Press and Connecting the Dots

As the PIPA and other studies suggest, the most noteworthy way in which the press contributed to tilting the prewar debate in favor of the Bush administration was to leave unchallenged the key assumptions and assertions of the proponents of war with Iraq. Perhaps because so many of

President George W. Bush's advisors had served in his father's administration in 1990 at the time of the invasion of Kuwait, they knew firsthand the potential dangers of not appearing to have a valid rationale for military action during the "establishing phase" of a war.[8] Unlike the first Bush administration, which wasted a period of valuable time casting about for a reason powerful enough to convince the public of the need for war with Iraq (e.g., it's a fight for democracy, it's about who controls the oil, it's about jobs, it's that Saddam is another Hitler, and so on), officials this time around chanted the same mantra from the moment the drums of war began to beat in August 2002.

According to this White House story line, the events of September 11 marked the beginning of a war on terror in which Iraq played a prominent role, both in the planning and execution of the attacks on the United States in 2001 and as a likely enemy in the near future armed with the most deadly WMDs. The only rational way to deal with such an adversary was through "regime change."

Why Americans should come so readily to accept this line of reasoning, and why only a sustained challenge from the press might have made a difference, is rooted in the impact that the events of 9/11 have had on most Americans. To say that Americans should have been less susceptible to manipulation or that they should have learned to be less fearful than other countries that have experienced terrorism over far longer periods of time and at much greater human cost is to ignore the simple reality that human beings do not live their lives by comparison, and Americans are certainly no exception. It is precisely because the trauma of 9/11 was so great that the mainstream media's deferential manner was most problematic.

And then there are those who wish to argue that the president or his advisors never actually encouraged false beliefs about Iraq and the war on terror, or who doubt journalism's role in reinforcing them. Such skeptics will first have to explain away such findings as those contained in the impressive study by Gershkoff and Kushner, which is based on a content analysis of all presidential speeches dealing with terrorism and/or Iraq delivered from September 11, 2001 to May 1, 2003, when the president famously delivered his end of hostilities speech from the deck of an aircraft carrier.[9] The researchers then looked at shifts in public opinion following key Bush addresses, as well as following the famous Powell presentation on Iraq and WMD before the United Nations.

According to the authors, while President Bush never publicly and explicitly connected Saddam Hussein and Iraq to 9/11, he used the "consistent technique of linking Iraq with the terms 'terrorism,' and 'al Qaeda' [that] provided the context from which such a connection could be made. Bush also never publicly connected Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden,

the leader of al Qaeda. However, whether or not Bush connected each dot from Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden, the use of particular language and transitions in official speeches allowed, and indeed almost compelled, the listener to make this inference."[10]

As a result of their findings, Gershkoff and Kushner posit that the public responded to the "rhetoric it heard with impressively high levels of support for the war," citing as only one example the nine percent of Americans who switched from being antiwar to supporting it after the president's 2003 State of the Union message.[11]

On the assumption that to accept Bush's "Iraq as War on Terror" frame as legitimate "the American people had to hear it, understand it, and be faced with no other convincing frames,"[12] the authors also analyzed coverage of the president's speeches in The *New York Times* for the same time period. What they discovered is that "While at least some debate existed on the actual policy of war, almost none occurred within the *Times*' news coverage over the framing of the conflict in terms of *terrorism* [my emphasis]," and concluded that "the information flow remained one sided for the duration of the months preceding the war on Iraq."[13]

As a result, the authors say that during the period of their study, public opinion never fell below 55 percent and eventually achieved a level at or above 70 percent, despite the fact that polling revealed Americans were generally aware of the potential for a war to result in a large number of casualties, a weakened economy, and quite possibly a short-term increase in terrorism on the home front.[14]

Given that journalists are reluctant to take on a popular sitting president entirely on their own, the authors are careful to point out that one explanation for the muted questioning of the president's assertions in the press had to do with the tepid and cautious response of the Democratic Party to Bush. Such an explanation ignores that the press is popularly supposed to take its own initiative a priori, or that there were legions of academic experts and independent defense analysts who might have provided the basis for oppositional news frames, not to mention a large and vocal antiwar movement.

A particularly valuable part of the Gershkoff–Kushner study is their treatment of the effect on public opinion of Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 5, 2003 speech to the United Nations, an event that they and others, including myself, see as the pivotal moment in the run-up to the war. According to the authors, "Powell's speech provided more evidence than any other official administration speech about the links between Iraq with Al Qaeda and he made such links explicit."[15] The impact of Powell's case making was huge. According to Gershkoff–Kushner, there "was a *30-point jump* [their emphasis] in the number of Americans who felt convinced of a link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda" after he spoke.[16]

A piece in the *Columbia Journalism Review* argues that among Powell's most receptive audience members were editorial writers of some of the United State's most prominent newspapers. " 'Irrefutable,' declared The *Washington Post*. Powell 'may not have produced a '*smoking gun*,' added The *New York Times*, but his speech left 'little question that Mr. Hussein had tried hard to conceal one.' " Similarly enthusiastic were editorials in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times, USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, which rounded out the study.[17]

There were indeed occasional debunking pieces written about Powell's performance raising sharp questions about his "facts," but these pieces usually appeared in newspapers or periodicals in the hinterlands[18] and on OpEd pages rather than news columns. If it were written as a result of journalistic inquiry, it came too late in the game as public opinion had already been fixed.

As for how the press dealt with the matter of WMDs in general, the most thorough critique of this dimension is by Massing.[19] Given that U.S. news organizations in the months *following* the war were only too eager to examine the Bush administration's shortcomings, especially in terms of faulty intelligence about WMDs, Massing was moved to pose the question, "where were you all before the war?" and the detailed answer he provides is not a flattering one, as this quote from the beginning of his study foreshadows: "Some maintain that the many analysts who've spoken out since the end of the war were mute before it. But that's not true. Beginning in the summer of 2002, the 'intelligence community' was rent by bitter disputes over how Bush officials were using the data on Iraq. Many journalists knew about this, yet few chose to write about it."[20]

Among other things, in the period before the war, Massing argues, "US journalists were far too reliant on sources sympathetic to the administration. Those with dissenting views—and there were more than a few—were shut out,"[21] and he provides ample supporting detail to make his case. He also charges that the reporting of The *New York Times* was "especially deficient" but found that the *Times*' editorial page was frequently more "questioning."[22]

Massing was not the only critic to raise serious and compelling questions about press coverage of Iraq and WMDs. A study at the University of Maryland[23] and a piece in the *AJR* (*American Journalism Review*)[24] give persuasive and disturbing corroboration.

Admitted Lack of Criticism by the Press

In an editorial a year after the major combat ended, the *Times* announced the findings of an introspective survey of its own coverage, especially on the

issue of Iraq and WMDs and its alleged ties to terrorism. After reviewing hundreds of articles written before, during, and just after the war, the *Times* came to conclude that in "a number of instances the coverage was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged."[25] While hardly an abject apology on the same scale as its reexamination of, say, the Jason Blair affair, the thrust of the editorial *mea culpa* for flawed foreign affairs reporting was more forthcoming than at any time previously. An even more detailed and pointed appraisal by the *Times*' public editor was published a week or so later.[26]

And some two months later in July, the *Times* went even further, pointing out that while it had been editorially skeptical of many aspects of President Bush's claims, it had "agreed with him on the critical point that Saddam Hussein was concealing a large weapons program that could pose a threat to the United States and its allies." It continued, "we should have been more aggressive in helping our readers understand that there was always a possibility that no large stockpiles existed." In an important admission, the *Times* wrote, "We did not listen carefully to the people who disagreed with us . . . we had a 'group think' of our own." Concluded the *Times*, "And even though this page came down against the invasion, we regret now that we didn't do more to challenge the president's assumptions."[27] The *Washington Post* followed with its own apologia in August of 2004.[28]

Why indeed didn't the *Times*, the *Post*, and the rest of the mainstream media challenge the president's assumptions about the need for a war that has had such extraordinary consequences for all concerned? How did a free press upon which Jefferson and Madison placed such high hopes come to such a pass? What could explain the failure of a press system that considers itself to be uniquely adversarial to power? As with many such matters, the reasons are both simple and complex.

A list of several of the most often heard explanations is topped by the belief that after 9/11 the press corps came to conclude collectively that in the interests of national unity it was untoward to criticize the commander in chief.[29] Two other possibilities frequently voiced were the fear of journalists of appearing unpatriotic, thereby alienating audience members, and the impact of such relatively new players on the journalistic scene as Fox News driving public discourse to the jingoistic right. Given the history of journalism since World War II, however, a more complex set of factors may be at work.

Study after study of mainstream press performance during periods of international conflict since 1946 involving U.S. interests, particularly where war is concerned, indicate that journalistic deference to Washington's official perspective is hardly a new phenomenon. In instances ranging from

the Bay of Pigs to the Dominican Republic to Vietnam and the Iranian revolution, not to mention the invasions of Grenada and Panama, the first Gulf War, and the war against Yugoslavia, there was nothing unique about press behavior in 2003. What is new is that a policy came to ruin so quickly that the president's assumptions and strategies as well as the record of how poorly the press had covered them simply could not be ignored. Usually, years pass before the full extent of a policy disaster is known. Not so in the case of Iraq.

The press's behavior in 2003 has deep roots in the kind of national security journalism that emerged after World War II and prevailed throughout the cold war. The combination of economic and ideological competition for power between the United States and the Soviet Union, taken together with a fear of nuclear weapons, had transforming effects on American politics and institutions that have never been completely understood. In particular, it has never been fully appreciated that nuclear weapons are an inherently *undemocratic* technology that, out of necessity, concentrates power in the executive branch.

What does not seem to be generally grasped today is that while after 1989 the United States no longer possessed a powerful and coherent ideological schema to drive national security concerns, the national security state has neither withered away, nor has the military industrial complex suddenly found other work. Since September 11, 2001, the war on terror has taken care of this vacuum and driven a return to cold war norms. The national security state, as it were, had morphed into the Homeland Security State.

One of the institutions most dramatically transformed by the coming of the homeland security state has been the press, which before World War II could not dependably be counted on to defer to the executive's judgment on the need for war. Of course, once a war began, the press like the general public rallied to the cause, which is true of any press system at any time in any country. But at least before wars began, there frequently was an open and vigorous debate on the merits of military solutions. Not so after 1946 and the coming of the national security state.

Unlike the domestic arena, journalists and journalism simply lack the expertise or intellectual courage and self-confidence to dispute a sitting president on matters of national security, particularly when Congress remains compliant rather than combative. Moreover, they lack the *idiom*, not to mention supportive professional milieu, which is to say that they have yet to find a "clear and effective way to report incorrect impressions and untruthful statements, particularly those that emanate from the White House . . . Journalists are notoriously reluctant to use the word 'lie' when describing the statements of public officials."[30]

Compounding the problem is that just as the cold war got underway, the media in the United States moved from the periphery of the economy

to dead center. This in turn led to concentration of ownership of media outlets on an unprecedented scale, and news organizations more often than not became part of conglomerates whose primary business interest was profit maximization—not the pursuit of truth.

In sum, after World War II, unbridled corporatism came to mix with an American quest for power and the result has been a journalistic deference to the statist perspective that was given new life by the events of 9/11. Such a combination produced the sort of journalism that preceded the 2003 war with Iraq.

It should be understood that "deference" means a yielding to the judgment of another. It does not mean abject submission, which is why journalism can and frequently does eventually turn on public officials. The problem is that such a turn occurs only *after* a policy is in deep trouble and policy elites have first opened the debate themselves.[31] Rarely, if ever, does this occur *before* a policy disaster occurs. And there is the rub.

The Future

What then are the prospects for coverage of the next decision by an American executive to pursue the path of war, whether in the best interests of the country or not? They are not promising, if Overholser's blunt appraisal is on the mark: "We [the press] are deflected from our driving purpose—to keep readers informed. Our newsrooms are marketing-driven and profit-oriented, our staffs are poorly trained and dispirited. We dread being called liberal, we hate to be seen as unpatriotic. We fear making our readers unhappy, we don't want to insult powerful people—indeed we seem to yearn for their favor."[32]

A more optimistic view is held by those who argue that the outpouring of studies, reports, and books dealing with the abject failure of intelligence preceding the 2003 war, taken together with ample evidence of the Bush administration's obsession with wrongheaded assumptions about the world in general and the Middle East in particular, will keep such a debacle from happening again. In sum, lessons will be learned.

I cannot help but remember a conference panel I participated on in Rome, in 1991, not long after the Gulf War. The other participants were retired *Times*' political columnist Tom Wicker, noted peace researcher Johan Galtung, and the *Times*' Judith Miller. Miller's remarks that day in a way presaged her work on WMDs and Iraq more than a decade later, a body of work that would come under sharp criticism by such as Massing. While Wicker and I politely begged to differ with Miller, it is what Galtung had to say that I remember most clearly. He closed the session with the judgment that all the well-reasoned critiques of press coverage and U.S. war policies in

the world will not change journalistic behavior. No lessons from the Gulf would be learned anymore than they had been in Vietnam. The press would behave pretty much as it had in 1990–91 the next time around.

I thought Galtung unduly pessimistic at the time, but that was before the second war with Iraq. I have since been forced to reconsider.

Notes

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