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The media ritual of lamenting the habitual

Dan Rather caused some ripples when he spoke at a law school in New York on Sept. 19 and warned that politicians have been putting effective pressure on the corporate owners of major broadcast outlets. Summarizing his remarks, the Hollywood Reporter said that the former CBS anchor contended "there is a climate of fear running through newsrooms stronger than he has ever seen in his more than four-decade career."

When a network TV correspondent makes noises that indicate a possible break with the corporate media establishment, I think of something that Mark Twain said: "It's easy to quit smoking. I've done it hundreds of times."

As a matter of routine, television anchors and their colleagues at the networks avidly go along with the White House and the Pentagon. When there's a war, with rare exceptions they provide the kind of coverage that Washington officials appreciate. Long afterward, when the mania subsides, a few TV journalists may express some misgivings. But when the next war comes along, it's back to propaganda business as usual.

Over the course of his career, Rather occasionally voiced alarm that news outlets were being intimidated by government authorities and other powerful interests. But he didn't noticeably challenge such constraints in his on-air work.

During the Gulf War, in early 1991, the news coverage was so laudatory that a former media strategist for President Reagan was ecstatic. "If you were going to hire a public relations firm to do the media relations for an international event," said Michael Deaver, "it couldn't be done any better than this is being done."

Dan Rather was part of that PR bonanza for the Gulf War. As the war came to an end, people watching CBS saw Rather close an interview with the 1st Marine Division commander by shaking his hand and exclaiming: "Again, general, congratulations on a job wonderfully done!"

The country's most acclaimed print outlets marched to the beat of the same drum. Chris Hedges covered the Gulf War for the New York Times. More than a decade later,

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with a critique much deeper than anything Rather has ever publicly offered, Hedges wrote in a book: "The notion that the press was used in the war is incorrect. The press wanted to be used. It saw itself as part of the war effort."

In the book, "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning," Hedges made clear that truth-seeking independence was far from the media agenda: "The press was as eager to be of service to the state during the war as most everyone else. Such docility on the part of the press made it easier to do what governments do in wartime, indeed what governments do much of the time, and that is lie." Variations in news coverage did not change the overwhelming sameness of outlook: "I boycotted the pool system, but my reports did not puncture the myth or question the grand crusade to free Kuwait. I allowed soldiers to grumble. I shed a little light on the lies spread to make the war look like a coalition, but I did not challenge in any real way the patriotism and jingoism that enthused the crowds back home. We all used the same phrases. We all looked at Iraq through the same lens."

Six days after 9/11, during a conspicuous – and still worth pondering – appearance on David Letterman's show, Rather declared that "George Bush is the president, he makes the decisions." Moments later, Rather said: "Wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And he'll make the call."

Yet eight months later, Rather was in a momentary self-critical mode. He told an interviewer with BBC television in mid-May 2002: "There was a time in South Africa that people would put flaming tires around people's necks if they dissented. And in some ways the fear is that you will be 'necklaced' here, you will have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck. Now it is that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions." He was speaking on May 16, 2002.

But less than a year later, in the early spring of 2003, Rather fully joined in the war boosterism during the CBS coverage of the Iraq invasion. And days after Baghdad fell, he went on the CNN program "Larry King Live" and emphasized his professional allegiance. "Look, I'm an American," Rather said. "I never tried to kid anybody that I'm some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want my country to win, whatever the definition of 'win' may be. Now, I can't and don't argue that that is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced."

Soon afterward, a less well-known correspondent at another network was evidently feeling some disquiet. In late April 2003, a few weeks after Saddam statues fell in Baghdad, MSNBC's Ashleigh Banfield caused a stir when she spoke on a college campus in Kansas. "There are horrors that were completely left out of this war," she said. "So was this journalism or was this coverage? There is a grand difference between

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journalism and coverage, and getting access does not mean you're getting the story, it just means you're getting one more arm or leg of the story. And that's what we got, and it was a glorious, wonderful picture that had a lot of people watching and a lot of advertisers excited about cable news. But it wasn't journalism, because I'm not so sure that we in America are hesitant to do this again, to fight another war, because it looked like a glorious and courageous and so successful terrific endeavor, and we got rid of a horrible leader: We got rid of a dictator, we got rid of a monster, but we didn't see what it took to do that."

Four days later, responding to a flap over Banfield's remarks, a spokesperson for NBC management admonished the fleetingly errant reporter in the course of issuing an apology: "She and we both agreed that she didn't intend to demean the work of her colleagues, and she will choose her words more carefully in the future."

That's the pattern that we've seen from prominent TV news correspondents. In a wartime frenzy, they blend in with the prevailing media scenery. Later, a few briefly utter words of regret. But next time around they revert to the habit of behaving like war cheerleaders instead of independent journalists.

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book

"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

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