

DECEMBER 22

A new phase of bright spinning lies about Iraq

Three days before Christmas, the Bush administration launched a new salvo of bright spinning lies about the Iraq war. "In an interview with reporters traveling with him on an Air Force cargo plane to Baghdad," the Associated Press reported Thursday morning, Donald Rumsfeld "hinted that a preliminary decision had been made to go below the 138,000 baseline" of U.S. troops in Iraq."

Throughout 2006, until Election Day in early November, this kind of story will be a frequent media refrain as the Bush regime does whatever it can to prevent a loss of Republican majorities in the House and Senate. By continuing to fortify large military bases in Iraq – and by continuing to escalate an air war there courtesy of U.S. taxpayers but largely outside the U.S. media frame – the White House is determined to exploit every weakness and contradiction of antiwar sentiment inside the United States.

There's a lot for the pro-war propagandists to exploit. American opponents of this war often emphasize the deaths and injuries of U.S. troops and the anguish of loved ones at home. At the same time, to whatever extent it's a conscious strategy or a genuine nationalistic form of narcissism, Americans who denounce the war commonly seem to be playing to a media gallery that can easily acknowledge the importance of American lives – but downplays the loss of Iraqi lives unless those tragedies can be pinned on enemies of the U.S. occupation.

What's on the horizon for 2006 is that the Bush administration will strive to put any real or imagined reduction of U.S. occupation troop levels in the media spotlight. Meanwhile, the Pentagon will use massive air power in Iraq.

It's a process already underway, as independent journalist Dahr Jamail – who worked on the ground in Iraq for more than eight months of the U.S. occupation – pointed out in a mid-December article titled "An Increasingly Aerial Occupation." As he put it: "The American media continues to ignore the increasingly devastating air war being waged in Iraq against an ever more belligerent Iraqi resistance – and, as usual, Iraqi civilians continue to bear the largely unreported brunt of the bombing."

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Yes, we should demand swift withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. But, at this point, to do so without also demanding an end to U.S. bombing of Iraq is to fall into a trap laid by the war makers in Washington. This kind of thing has happened before – with devastating results for people trying to survive a Pentagon air war that was receiving little U.S. media attention.

The Nixon administration was eager to divert attention from the slaughter in South-east Asia to peace talks in Paris – and to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam over a period of more than three years. In general the networks were all too willing to oblige.

The negotiations and withdrawals served as diversions from bloody facts of the continuing war. The tonnage of U.S. bombing actually increased – while the networks' focus moved away from the ongoing bloodshed. At NBC, for instance, "although combat footage was sent to New York from the Saigon bureau every day for two months following the [early November 1968 U.S.] decision [initiating peace negotiations in Paris], it was aired only three times on the evening news," journalist Edward Jay Epstein noted. "The preceding year, when there had been almost the same number of American combat deaths during the same period, combat stories were shown almost every night of the week."

With the media wisdom determining that the main Vietnam story had become the negotiations, NBC News producer Robert Northshield said that "combat stories seemed like a contradiction and would confuse the audience." Other networks came to similar conclusions. And the media evasions were to become more extreme as Washington reduced the number of American troops in Vietnam.

A typical approach was embodied in edicts handed down at ABC, where the executive producer of the evening news, Av Westin, put out a March 1969 memo that explained: "I have asked our Vietnam staff to alter the focus of their coverage from combat pieces to interpretive ones, pegged to the eventual pull-out of the American forces. This point should be stressed for all hands." In a telex to the network's Saigon bureau, Westin gave the news of his decree to the news correspondents: "I think the time has come to shift some of our focus from the battlefield, or more specifically American military involvement with the enemy, to themes and stories under the general heading 'We Are on Our Way Out of Vietnam.'"

For U.S. media, the Vietnam story had been front-and-center when American soldiers were firmly deployed there. But as the White House gradually pulled troops from Vietnam, the media shifted farther away from the actual destruction of people, villages, farmland and ecosystems – even while the U.S. air war and coordinated ground

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assaults in Southeast Asia persisted at a very high rate of killing.

During 2006, reductions of U.S. troop levels in Iraq – accompanied by intensive media spin about prospects for U.S. military disengagement – are likely even while the already-horrific air war escalates. Those who die under U.S. bombs will rarely make the TV network news or the newspapers back in the United States.

The Bush administration is eager to downplay the escalating air war. In 2006, the antiwar movement must do the opposite.

*Part of this article is adapted from Norman Solomon's new book
"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com*