

MARCH 23

Blaming the media for bad war news

Top officials in the Bush administration have often complained that news coverage of Iraq focuses on negative events too much and fails to devote enough attention to positive developments. Yet the White House has rarely picked direct fights with U.S. media outlets during this war. For the most part, President Bush leaves it to others to scapegoat the media.

Karl Rove's spin strategy is heavily reliant on surrogates. They're likely to escalate blame-the-media efforts as this year goes on.

A revealing moment – dramatizing the pro-war division of labor – came on March 22, during Bush's nationally televised appearance in Wheeling, West Virginia. On the surface, the format resembled a town hall, but the orchestration was closer to war rally. (According to White House spokesperson Scott McClellan, the local Chamber of Commerce had distributed 2,000 tickets while a newspaper in the community gave out 100.) It fell to a woman who identified herself as being from Columbus, Ohio, to give the Wheeling event an anti-media jolt.

Her husband – who was an Army officer in Iraq, where "his job while serving was as a broadcast journalist" – "has returned from a 13-month tour in Tikrit," she said. And then came the populist punch:

"He has brought back several DVDs full of wonderful footage of reconstruction, of medical things going on. And I ask you this from the bottom of my heart for a solution to this, because it seems that our major media networks don't want to portray the good."

She added: "They just want to focus ... on another car bomb or they just want to focus on some more bloodshed or they just want to focus on how they don't agree with you and what you're doing, when they don't even probably know how you're doing what you're doing anyway. But what can we do to get that footage on CNN, on Fox, to get it on Headline News, to get it on the local news?... It portrays the good. And if people could see that, if the American people could see it, there would never be another negative word about this conflict."

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The audience punctuated the woman's statement with very strong applause and then a standing ovation. But rather than pile on, Bush adopted an air of restraint.

"Just got to keep talking," he advised. "Word of mouth, there's blogs, there's Internet, there's all kinds of ways to communicate, which is literally changing the way people are getting their information. And so if you're concerned, I would suggest that you reach out to some of the groups that are supporting the troops, that have gotten Internet sites, and just keep the word moving. And that's one way to deal with an issue without suppressing a free press. We will never do that in America."

In effect, Bush is holding the coat of those who go after the news media on his behalf. Many pro-war voices constantly accuse the media of anti-war and anti-Bush biases – with the accusations routinely amplified in mass-media echo chambers. Cranking up the volume are powerhouse outlets like Fox News, the Wall Street Journal editorial page, the New York Post, the Washington Times, the Weekly Standard, legions of high-profile loyalist pundits, and literally hundreds of radio talk-show hosts across the country who have political outlooks similar to Rush Limbaugh's.

With the current war less popular than ever, it's never been more important for war backers to blame the media.

During the last several years of the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration went public with a much more heavy-handed approach, deploying Vice President Spiro Agnew to make a series of speeches that denounced critical news coverage.

In 1969, Agnew started out by blasting American TV networks (which could be counted on one hand at the time). Television news, he said, came from a "tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men."

Then the vice president turned his ire on certain newspapers, especially the New York Times and the Washington Post. He warned against "the trend toward the monopolization of the great public information vehicles and the concentration of power over public opinion in fewer and fewer hands." But Agnew had nothing bad to say about big pro-Nixon newspaper chains like Hearst and Newhouse. Nor did he utter any complaints against the huge-circulation magazines Parade and Reader's Digest, which kept cheering on the war effort.

Often using syncopated language, Agnew conflated journalists who were reporting inconvenient facts and protesters who were trying to stop the war. He said that they were "nattering nabobs of negativism," an "effete corps of impudent snobs" and "hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history" – all worthy of wrath from an administration determined to continue the war in Southeast Asia.

Contortions of populism that embrace war, like the kind of sentiments on display dur-

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ing President Bush's travel blitz in recent days, chronically invert the realities of power. While the president and his corporate backers wield enormous media power, they pose as intrepid and besieged underdogs.

Unlike progressive media critics, who scarcely have a toehold in mainstream media, the political right has both feet firmly planted inside the dominant corporate media structures.

The myth of the liberal media is an umbrella canard that shelters the corollary myth of anti-war media. From the time that the New York Times splashed stories about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction on front pages before the invasion of Iraq, a cross-section of the U.S. media has remained way behind the curve of what could be credibly reported about gaping holes in White House claims. But even a lapdog press corps is apt to start growling when it has been leashed to lies too many times.

With its war policies unraveling in Iraq – and in the domestic political arena of the United States – the administration may continue to avoid directly attacking the press. But, with winks and nods from the White House, some of the president's boosters will be eager to blame news media for Republican difficulties as the midterm congressional elections loom larger on the horizon.

Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com