

Independent press was a target in Iraq

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 28, 2005 – With CNN’s Eason Jordan silent, or silenced, the right brain of the blogosphere has nailed a new media scalp to its belt. Mr. Jordan, who had been with CNN for 23 years, said during the World Economic Forum in Switzerland that a dozen journalists covering the war “not only [had] been killed by U.S. troops in Iraq but they had in fact been targeted,” according to press accounts. Mr. Jordan quickly tried to back off his statement, but the reverberations led to his resignation. Now the issue he raised seems destined to disappear, with many believing that since he didn’t offer backup, there is nothing to the story.

Not true.

Mr. Jordan’s remarks about the targeting and killing of journalists were not invented, even if he did do what executives often do: attempt to dampen a controversy that turns out to be too hot to handle.

Fox News commentators said that even raising the issue of targeting journalists was “sliming our troops.” Like the Pentagon’s efforts, this was a way to dismiss the issue, even though there is evidence to make such a case.

The reality is that Jordan’s concerns have a background and context that were under-reported in our media. Before the war, the Pentagon issued warnings that sounded like threats, saying it would not guarantee the safety of journalists who were not officially “embedded” into assigned U.S. military units.

Pentagon publicist Victoria Clarke, around the time the war began, said that journalists who went out on their own were “putting themselves at risk.”

On March 8, 2003, 12 days before the invasion, Kate Aidie, then a war correspondent for the BBC, said on RTE radio in Ireland that she was told by Pentagon officials “that any [satellite] uplinks by journalists would be fired on” by coalition aircraft.

What they were doing was creating an environment of intimidation and threat. This was a ploy to ensure that the reporters who did go to Iraq without

Pentagon cooperation would be blamed when anything happened.

This was part of a larger strategy to keep the media in line. It was no secret that an administration that insisted “You are with us or against us” was determined to keep the media “on message” by implementing an intrusive “information dominance” strategy to monitor coverage and “manage perceptions.”

The roots of this policy go back to the war in Vietnam, which many in the military felt was lost because of negative news coverage. The Pentagon was determined not to let that happen in Iraq.

In his plan for the Iraq war, according to published reports, Gen. Tommy Franks explicitly referred to the media as the “fourth front.” This was an obvious reference to the “fourth estate.” The Pentagon intended to win the battle of the media as well as the shooting war. To do so, it set the rules for the media.

Sadly, out of patriotic correctness, the major U.S.-based news networks went along. Jingoism often displaced journalism. Flag-waving replaced objectivity.

It takes courage just to address the issue. Consider CNN’s Christiane Amanpour’s gutsy but controversial condemnation of “disinformation at the highest levels.” Or Ashleigh Banfield’s public criticism of “sanitized” coverage that probably cost her her job at MSNBC. They made clear there was an official determination to control the news at all costs.

In this atmosphere, it was inevitable that there were incidents involving journalists. Ask ITN in London what happened to the late Terry Lloyd and his team, who were driving in a clearly-marked TV vehicle shot up by U.S. soldiers, who at first denied it. ITN officials said they “got nowhere” with military officials when they tried to investigate the facts surrounding the incident.

How bad was it? Ask BBC veteran John Simpson, who, accompanied by a military liaison, was nearly bombed into the next world by a U.S. jet in the North of Iraq, even when the military knew they were there. Two of his colleagues were killed.

In an article by Tim Gopsill of Britain’s National Union of Journalists, Mr. Simpson is quoted from the book “Tell Me Lies,” edited by David Miller: “The independent journalists are upholding a great tradition, but my goodness they are taking a hammering. The system that allows this to happen, even encourages this to happen, is stupid and despicable.”

Adds Nik Gowing of BBC World: “The trouble is that a lot of the military – particularly the American military – do not want us there. And they make it very uncomfortable for us to work. And I think that this is leading to security forces in some instances feeling it is legitimate to target us with deadly force and with impunity.”

Mr. Gopsill also said that “U.S. forces detained and badly mistreated two journalists, one Portuguese and one Israeli, whom they believed were spies.” According to the NUJ, they were beaten. The incident was not widely reported. (Yes, Iraqi forces also harassed and mistreated journalists. They killed two foreign embeds with a missile attack.)

After two journalists died April 8, 2003, at Baghdad’s Palestine Hotel when a tank shell was lobbed into a building known by the Pentagon as a site where numerous Western media were based, Reuters called for an independent investigation. The International Federation of Journalists angrily demanded a real probe.

Phillip Knightley, a respected historian on war and media and author of “The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker From the Crimea to Kosovo,” correctly said, “There will be no investigation.” He added, “I believe that the occasional shots fired at media sites are not accidental and that war correspondents will now be targeted.”

As a former CNN producer, I find that the Jordan incident chilled debate and diverted us from the real issue of how the U.S. military spun media coverage and why networks went along. A number of journalists covering Iraq – not just Jordan – continue to believe journalists were targeted.

The citizens-initiated World Tribunal on Iraq, which met in Rome in February, asks a question that can’t be deflected: “Are Mr. Jordan’s claims accurate?”

In its report, it joined “the calls by international media groups and the families of dead journalists for a full independent investigation by an international team of journalists who should be given the right to question members of the military.

“If independent journalists can be killed with impunity,” said the report, “and executives forced out for asking about it, aren’t we facing something more serious than has been raised so far?”