

Welcome to year three of our two-week war

TELEVISION news is getting cluttered with bizarre national stories. We all need to know that Michael Jackson showed up to court in his pajamas. Then there's the obscene antics of a group of Republican lawmakers making national news by cryptically subpoenaing Terri Schiavo, a brain dead woman who has been in a persistent vegetative state for 15 years, to testify before congress. Most American newspapers are running front page stories about the Baseball steroid probes – without mentioning ex-sluggger Jose Canseco's allegations that the problem blossomed in the 1990s at George W. Bush's Texas Rangers.

What does a news hole cluttered with steroid junkies, a demented fallen pop star, and the abuse of a brain-dead woman's living corpse all add up to? The deduction is simple: Something else is going on in the world. That something else is the second anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq – with 725 anti-war demonstrations taking place across the U.S. last Saturday. We now know that the invasion violated both U.S. and international law, and that all of the supposed pretenses for the invasion, ranging from Saddam's supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction to his alleged links to al Qaeda and the 9-11 attacks, were all fabricated by the Bush administration. We know that many of these lies were packaged and sold to us by public relations practitioners hired by the Bush team. And finally, we now know that the only reason people believe these lies is because a

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subservient mass media echoed them unchallenged in the run-up to the war.

The awful numbers

The rest is history. Approximately 2,000 coalition forces, including regulars and "contractors," are now dead. Mark Benjamin, writing an investigative report for the conservative U.P.I. press agency estimates that as many as 35,000 American troops were seriously injured in Iraq. Benjamin's reporting was commended by veterans groups such as the American Legion, though it was all but ignored in the pro-war corporate press. The respected British medical journal Lancet estimates that over 100,000 Iraqi civilians have died as a result of the invasion. This is what's been going on in our name while we've been distracted by freakish, bizarre, and ultimately, trivial news reports.

Last week, without much fanfare, an bipartisan united congress approved another \$81.4 billion appropriation for the Iraq War, bringing the total financial cost of waging war so far to over \$300 billion – this for a war that Donald Rumsfeld promised us in January of 2003, according to The Washington Post, would cost "under \$50 billion." At the time, Bush's economic advisor, Lawrence Lindsey, estimated that the war could cost \$100 billion and maybe even as much as \$200 billion. Such flirtation with the truth, restrained as we now know it was, cost Lindsey his job.

Rumsfeld, who by all indications is either extraordinarily incompetent, or a pathological liar, is still on the job rattling sabers at other Middle Eastern countries. His estimates of a \$50 billion war, by contrast, have disappeared down the memory hole of our mass media's dissonance incinerator.

The cash incinerator

Most of the \$300 billion also seems to have fallen into some sort of incinerator – with soldier's parents literally organizing bake sales to buy body armor for their children fighting in Iraq. But money doesn't fall into incinerators – it gets stuffed into pockets and bank accounts. This is where the war profiteers, society's lowest bottom feeders, come into play.

Foremost among them is the Halliburton Corporation, formerly headed up by Vice President Dick Cheney, who is still a major Halliburton shareholder. And it's Halliburton that stars in one of this week's underreported news stories – a story that should have been mentioned as part of the report on Congress' latest war appropriations. The same week that Congress approved the Bush administration's latest request to fund the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a Pentagon audit caught Halliburton overcharging the U.S. government by at least \$108 million on a contract to deliver oil to Iraq.

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The Los Angeles Times reports that the Pentagon's Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA) had a difficult time tracking down the overcharges since Halliburton officials thwarted the investigation by misleading auditors. Once the report was completed, according to the Congressional Committee on Government Reform's Minority Office, the Bush administration attempted to edit the Halliburton overcharges out of the publicly released report. The Government Reform committee unredacted the report, replacing the missing information. The effort was more or less in vain, since few media outlets paid much attention to the report in either form. Too bad. It was full of gems – such as Halliburton charging \$27.5 million to deliver \$82,100 worth of propane. Perhaps they loaded the propane into thimbles or whippets and shipped them one at a time in taxicabs. The DCAA flat out termed the price "illogical."

\$108 loads of dirty laundry

It might be illogical, but not necessarily criminal, since the Bush administration gave Cheney's company a no-bid contract – in essence allowing them to charge taxpayers whatever they damned please. Most of the contracts guaranteed Halliburton's subsidiary a two to three percent profit over their costs, in effect rewarding them for pissing government money away in their own local no-bid contracts. Hence Halliburton, prior to the most recent charges of overcharging, was spending wildly at their regional headquarters in Kuwait – getting overcharged, for example, over a million dollars per month on their laundry bill. According to a report published in Vanity Fair, Halliburton paid \$108 of taxpayer money per load to have laundry washed – pocketing about three dollars in contract profit for every wash load. Likewise, the report cites Halliburton for using government funds to buy brand new light duty luxury SUVs for their employees. The cars were trashed within 90 days of desert use.

A Pentagon audit conducted last year found that Halliburton's subsidiary could not document having completed up to \$1.8 billion dollars worth of construction work in Iraq for which it had charged the Pentagon. Given this company's past history of ripping off the U.S. government, there's no excuse for them to still be in a position to continue ripping off the government – except for the fact that they more or less are the government. Halliburton's tentacles reach way into the White House where the beast roosts. The administration, by launching the Iraq War, suddenly had hundreds of billions of dollars at their disposal – with Democrats ready and willing to rubber stamp any Republican requests for more money, lest they be branded by Republican spinmeisters as "weak on defense." The Bush administration, rather than efficiently spending this money on things like body and vehicle armor, essentially just tossed it into a fan aimed at Republican-

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connected military contractors, who funnel some of it back into the Republican Party in the form of campaign contributions. This financial revolving door, in essence, allows Republicans to channel taxpayer money into Republican campaign coffers.

The Bush administration is also tapping into Iraq's oil revenues, using the money, for example, to make payments to American corporations such as Toys-R-Us and Burger King for "lost earning potential" that they suffered during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The Christian Science Monitor reports that U.S. officials have disbursed about \$8.8 billion of this money without proper accounting. The Christian Science Monitor also cites Transparency International, a public watchdog group, as saying that misappropriation of funds in Iraq could be "the biggest corruption scandal in [world] history."

Taxpayer funded propaganda

The Bush administration is also tapping directly into taxpayer funds to oil its domestic propaganda machine. According to a report in last Sunday's New York Times, congressional budget reports document that one public relations firm, Ketchum Communications, has already received \$97 million to promote administration policies in the United States. In all, according to the report, the Bush administration has spent over a quarter of a billion dollars in taxpayer money – essentially to persuade taxpayers to allow them to continue misappropriating taxpayer money (of course, The Times didn't quite articulate it like this). Such a large infusion of money into a for-profit media system also serves to dissuade journalists from biting one of the hands that's feeding money into their industry. Hence, many of the same news agencies that have transparently allowed Bush administration propaganda to pass for news, have been remiss in reporting about Bush administration misappropriation of funds.

With the media off the job, we have to depend on the government to investigate itself. While a few Democrats are trying to pursue investigations, the majority Republican Party has been shamelessly thwarting them at every turn – as if all Republicans are inherently corrupt. Take the case of Republican congressional Majority Leader Tom Delay. Last year the House Ethics Committee slapped his wrist with an admonishment after examining evidence documenting that he linked support for legislation with campaign donations, essentially accepting bribes. Their report also showed that he bartered political support for another member of Congress' son, in exchange for that member's vote on the House floor. The conservative group, Judicial Watch, urged the disgraced Delay to step down as Majority Leader. Despite what should have been a humiliating national scandal – had the national media paid attention – Congressional Republicans chose to keep Delay on as their leader. Two of the Republican members of the House Ethics Committee who chose

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to admonish rather than discipline Delay, turned out to be contributors to his legal defense fund – thus throwing the ethics of the Ethics Committee into question.

This year Delay is being investigated by a Texas Grand Jury for involvement in a political fundraising scandal where three of his close political associates have already been indicted on criminal charges. The Republican response has been to change congressional ethics rules which were initially written by Republican lawmakers in 1993. The new rules allow members indicted on felony charges to maintain their leadership positions in Congress. In this political environment, don't expect the Republican politicians that now control the Congress and the Senate to give a damn about a kleptocratic Bush administration that starts needless illegal wars only to loot the ensuing war appropriations.

From the mouths of babes

Of course every misappropriation of funds begs the question – where are these funds coming from? The Congressional Budget Office, in examining the Bush administration's proposed federal budget, estimates that this year's budget will add \$1.6 trillion (as in a thousand billion) to the national debt – a debt that is owed to foreign powers such as China. In essence, the Bush administration is selling our country out from under us while looting the proceeds – with its actions all covered up in the fog of war. The Bush budget, incidentally, fails to include the ongoing costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, as well as any costs associated with the potential privatization of social security (estimated to initially require \$750 billion). Hence, the real deficit is much larger than \$1.6 trillion. Fifty years from now, when China and India are battling it out for global economic domination, historians will remember this moment in time – no doubt casting the Bush family legacy right up there with Benedict Arnold.

This wholesale theft and squander of taxpayer money is also being funded by wholesale cuts to essential public programs. The Bush budget, for example, proposes dropping 300,000 working poor from the Food Stamp program. It proposed cutting childcare subsidies to another 300,000 children while cutting 90,000 Head Start slots – essentially forcing single parents out of the job market and into dire poverty at a time when most states are renegeing on their commitment to fund social service programs. The budget also cuts 671,000 people out of the WIC health and nutrition programs for women and infants (deadbeat infants?). Another 370,000 low income families will lose their Section 8 housing subsidies, thrusting most of them into homelessness, while 360,000 families lose home energy assistance – essentially leaving poor families and senior citizens without heat. The budget also proposes \$45 billion in Medicaid cuts over

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the next ten years, thrusting local governments who have to make up those funds (or evict indigent disabled senior citizens from their nursing homes) into fiscal chaos. Also on the cutting block is aid for local police departments, funding for airport security and a half billion dollars worth of cuts to educational technology grants. It will also eliminate over a quarter billion dollars of freight and railroad subsidies – potentially crippling Amtrak.

The list of threatened cuts goes on and on – promising to degrade the lives of all Americans. The mass media, for its part, just isn't connecting the Bush administration's plunder and pillage of federal funds, to its draconian cuts in federal funding for domestic programs.

Media whores and wars

The point is that there's a direct connection between the pain we're feeling at home and the pain we're doling out in Iraq. There's a connection between the Bush administration's pillage of federal funds and our communities' lack of federal funding. And ultimately there's a connection between a subservient national media that prefers to turn a blind eye to government corruption and lies, and the ability of the government to lie and be corrupt. Most disturbing is the fact that there's also a connection between this media acquiescence and the horrendous events we're now seeing in Iraq – the deaths and dismemberment of both Americans and Iraqis, the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and civil society, and ultimately the bankruptcy of both the American economy and soul.