

MARCH 16

War-loving pundits

The third anniversary of the Iraq invasion is bound to attract a lot of media coverage, but scant recognition will go to the pundits who helped to make it all possible. Continuing with long service to the Bush administration's agenda-setting for war, prominent media commentators were very busy in the weeks before the invasion. At the Washington Post, the op-ed page's fervor hit a new peak on Feb. 6, 2003, the day after Colin Powell's mendacious speech to the U.N. Security Council.

Post columnist Richard Cohen explained that Powell was utterly convincing. "The evidence he presented to the United Nations – some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail – had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool – or possibly a Frenchman – could conclude otherwise."

Meanwhile, another one of the Post's syndicated savants, Jim Hoagland, led with this declaration: "Colin Powell did more than present the world with a convincing and detailed X-ray of Iraq's secret weapons and terrorism programs yesterday. He also exposed the enduring bad faith of several key members of the U.N. Security Council when it comes to Iraq and its 'web of lies,' in Powell's phrase." Hoagland's closing words banished doubt: "To continue to say that the Bush administration has not made its case, you must now believe that Colin Powell lied in the most serious statement he will ever make, or was taken in by manufactured evidence. I don't believe that. Today, neither should you."

Impatience grew among pundits who depicted the U.N.'s inspection process as a charade because Saddam Hussein's regime obviously possessed weapons of mass destruction. In an essay appearing on Feb. 13, 2003, Christopher Hitchens wrote: "Those who are calling for more time in this process should be aware that they are calling for more time for Saddam's people to complete their humiliation and subversion of the inspectors."

A few weeks later, on March 17, President Bush prefaced the imminent invasion by claiming in a televised speech: "Should Saddam Hussein choose confrontation, the

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American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war, and every measure will be taken to win it."

In the same speech, noting that "many Iraqis can hear me tonight in a translated radio broadcast," Bush offered reassurance. "I have a message for them: If we must begin a military campaign, it will be directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you."

The next day, Hitchens came out with an essay featuring similar assurances, telling readers that "the Defense Department has evolved highly selective and accurate munitions that can sharply reduce the need to take or receive casualties. The predictions of widespread mayhem turned out to be false last time – when the weapons [in the Gulf War] were nothing like so accurate." And, he added, "it can now be proposed as a practical matter that one is able to fight against a regime and not a people or a nation."

With the full-scale attack underway, the practicalities were evident from network TV studios. "The American public knows the importance of this war," Fox News pundit and Weekly Standard executive editor Fred Barnes proclaimed a few days after the invasion began. "They are not as casualty sensitive as the weenies in the American press are."

And what about the punditry after the ballyhooed "victory" in Iraq? Researchers at the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) have exhumed statements made by prominent media cheerleaders who were flush with triumph. Often showing elation as Baghdad fell, U.S. journalists lavished praise on the invasion and sometimes aimed derisive salvos at American opponents of the military action.

One of the most gleeful commentators on network television was MSNBC's "Hardball" host Chris Matthews. "We're all neo-cons now," he crowed on April 9, 2003, hours after a Saddam Hussein statue tumbled in Baghdad.

Weeks later, Matthews was still at it, making categorical declarations: "We're proud of our president. Americans love having a guy as president, a guy who has a little swagger, who's physical, who's not a complicated guy like Clinton or even like Dukakis or Mondale, all those guys, McGovern. They want a guy who's president. Women like a guy who's president. Check it out. The women like this war. I think we like having a hero as our president. It's simple."

Simple was more like it. And, in the rush of stateside enthusiasm for war on Iraq, centrist pundits like Matthews – apt to sway with the prevailing wind – were hardly inclined to buck the jingoistic storm.

Pseudo-patriotic hot air remained at gale force on Fox News Channel, still blowing strong. "Tommy Franks and the coalition forces have demonstrated the old axiom that

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boldness on the battlefield produces swift and relatively bloodless victory," Tony Snow told viewers in late April. "The three-week swing through Iraq has utterly shattered skeptics' complaints."

What passes for liberalism on Fox also cheered and gloated. Sean Hannity's weak debating partner, Alan Colmes, threw down a baiting challenge on April 25. "Now that the war in Iraq is all but over," Colmes demanded, "should the people in Hollywood who opposed the president admit they were wrong?"

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