

APRIL 5

When war crimes are impossible

Is President Bush guilty of war crimes? To even ask the question is to go far beyond the boundaries of mainstream U.S. media.

A few weeks ago, when a class of seniors at Parsippany High School in New Jersey prepared for a mock trial to assess whether Bush has committed war crimes, a media tempest ensued.

Typical was the response from MSNBC host Tucker Carlson, who found the very idea of such accusations against Bush to be unfathomable. The classroom exercise "implies people are accusing him of a crime against humanity," Carlson said. "It's ludicrous."

In Tennessee, the Chattanooga Times Free Press thundered in an editorial: "That some American 'educators' would have students 'try' our American president for 'war crimes' during time of war tells us that our problems are not only with terrorists abroad."

The standard way for media to refer to Bush and war crimes in the same breath is along the lines of this lead-in to a news report on CNN's "American Morning" in late March: "The Supreme Court's about to consider a landmark case and one that could have far-reaching implications. At issue is President Bush's powers to create war crimes tribunals for Guantanamo prisoners."

In medialand, when the subject is war crimes, the president of the United States points the finger at others. Any suggestion that Bush should face such a charge is assumed to be oxymoronic.

But a few journalists, outside the corporate media structures, are seriously probing Bush's culpability for war crimes. One of them is Robert Parry.

During the 1980s, Parry covered U.S. foreign policy for Associated Press and Newsweek; in the process he broke many stories related to the Iran-Contra scandal. Now he's the editor of the 10-year-old website Consortiumnews.com, an outlet he founded that has little use for the narrow journalistic path along Pennsylvania Avenue.

"In a world where might did not make right," Parry wrote in a recent piece, "George W. Bush, Tony Blair and their key enablers would be in shackles before a war crimes

tribunal at the Hague, rather than sitting in the White House, 10 Downing Street or some other comfortable environs in Washington and London.”

Over the top? I don't think so. In fact, Parry's evidence and analysis seem much more cogent – and relevant to our true situation – than the prodigious output of countless liberal-minded pundits who won't go beyond complaining about Bush's deceptions, miscalculations and tactical errors in connection with the Iraq war.

Is Congress ready to consider the possibility that the commander in chief has committed war crimes during the past few years? Of course not. But the role of journalists shouldn't be to snuggle within the mental confines of Capitol Hill. We need the news media to fearlessly address matters of truth, not cravenly adhere to limits of expediency.

When top officials in Lyndon Johnson's administration said that North Vietnam had launched two unprovoked attacks on U.S. vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin, the press corps took their word for it. When top officials in George W. Bush's administration said that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the press corps took their word for it.

We haven't yet seen any noticeable part of the Washington press corps raise the matter of war crimes by the president. Very few dare to come near the terrain that Parry explored in his March 28 article "Time to Talk War Crimes."

That article cites key statements by the U.S. representative to the Nuremberg Tribunal immediately after the Second World War. "Our position," declared Robert Jackson, a U.S. Supreme Court justice, "is that whatever grievances a nation may have, however objectionable it finds the status quo, aggressive warfare is an illegal means for settling those grievances or for altering those conditions."

During a March 26 appearance on the NBC program "Meet the Press," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tried to justify the invasion of Iraq this way: "We faced the outcome of an ideology of hatred throughout the Middle East that had to be dealt with. Saddam Hussein was a part of that old Middle East. The new Iraq will be a part of the new Middle East, and we will all be safer."

But, in a new essay on April 3, Parry points out that "this doctrine – that the Bush administration has the right to invade other nations for reasons as vague as social engineering – represents a repudiation of the Nuremberg Principles and the United Nations Charter's ban on aggressive war, both formulated largely by American leaders six decades ago."

Parry flags the core of the administration's maneuver: "Gradually, Rice and other senior Bush aides shifted their rationale from Hussein's WMD to a strategic justification, that is, politically transforming the Middle East."

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He concludes that "implicit in the U.S. news media's non-coverage of Rice's new rationale for war is that there is nothing objectionable or alarming about the Bush administration turning its back on principles of civilized behavior promulgated by U.S. statesmen at the Nuremberg Tribunal six decades ago."

Although the evidence is ample that President Bush led the way to aggressive warfare against Iraq, the mainstream U.S. news media keep proceeding on the assumption that – when the subject is war crimes – he's well cast as an accuser but should never be viewed as an appropriate defendant.

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