

AUGUST 24

The mythical end to the politics of fear

Nearly five years into the "war on terror," it's still at the core of American media and politics. Yeah, I've seen the recent polls showing a drop in public support for President Bush's "war on terror" claims. And I've read a spate of commentaries this month celebrating Bush's current lack of political traction on the terrorism issue, like the New York Times piece by Frank Rich last Sunday triumphantly proclaiming that "the era of Americans' fearing fear itself is over."

That's a comforting thought, hovering somewhere between complacent and delusional. Reflexive fear may be on vacation, but it hasn't quit. The "war on terror" motif is fraying – but it remains close at hand as a mighty pretext for present and future warfare.

The US war effort in Iraq is, if anything, more horrific than it was a year ago. Back then, in late summer, Frank Rich wrote a Times column – under the headline "Someone Tell the President the War Is Over" – mocking Bush's assertion on August 11, 2005, that "no decision has been made yet" about withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Responding in print days later, Rich concluded: "The country has already made the decision for Mr. Bush. We're outta there."

A year later, are we "outta there?" Only via the intellectualizing gymnastics of punditland. More Americans are aware that the "war on terror" – as an umbrella excuse for making war – is a bunch of lethal baloney. But can anyone point to a falloff of active US militarism as that realization has dawned? Did the Pentagon's warfare dissipate in the slightest while disdain from mainstream anti-Bush pundits went through the roof?

Looking ahead, does anyone credibly think that Democratic Party leaders can be relied on to stand up against rationales for a huge air assault on Iran – in the face of predictable claims that a massive attack has become necessary to forestall the development of nuclear weapons by a Tehran regime that supports the "terrorist" Hezbollah organization and has pledged the destruction of Israel?

In late summer 2006, all you've got to do is read the news pages of the New York Times to see systematic agenda-building for an airborne assault on Iran. Right now, in front of our eyes, the propaganda blitz is rivaling the kind of war groundwork laid by the same

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newspaper four years ago, replete with endless coverage of the US government's supposed "diplomatic" efforts.

"The era of Americans' fearing fear itself is over?" Don't make me laugh to keep from crying.

A war against a defined enemy can end; a war against an undefined threat can't.

In late November 2002, appearing on the "Washington Journal" program, retired US Army general William Odom told C-SPAN viewers: "Terrorism is not an enemy. It cannot be defeated. It's a tactic. It's about as sensible to say we declare war on night attacks and expect we're going to win that war."

Continuing his heretical comment, Odom said: "We're not going to win the war on terrorism. And it does whip up fear. Acts of terror have never brought down liberal democracies. Acts of parliament have closed a few."

The Bush administration, of course, has bypassed – and frequently vilified - any such insights. Meanwhile, few Democrats on the national stage have gone near challenging the themes of the "war on terror(ism)." And while some journalists have grown to express skepticism about the nonstop "anti-terror" rhetoric from the White House and its supporters, the overall stance of news media has involved routinely embracing the assumption that the USA is at war with terrorism. Along the way, that means ignoring how American firepower has been terrorizing civilians – directly in Iraq and Afghanistan, indirectly in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

The movie "Good Night, and Good Luck" dramatized Edward R. Murrow's decision to (finally) take on Senator Joseph McCarthy's red-baiting tactics. For those who wonder why so many journalists hung back and declined to directly challenge those tactics, which ran roughshod over the American political process for years, we can look around the US news media of 2006 and get a partial answer.

Yes, we can point to quite a few journalists who have gotten tough on Bush's refusal to address substantive criticism without reverting to the anti-terrorism pitch to tar his critics. But on the whole – and most egregiously in routine news coverage on front pages and news shows – the reporting accepts and propagates the basic world view of the Bush administration.

Typically, under the headline "Number of US Troops in Iraq Climbs," an August 23 story from Associated Press reported matter-of-factly: "No more than 2,500 Marines will be recalled at any one time, but there is no cap on the total number who may be forced back into service in the coming years as the military helps fight the war on terror." But the assertion that the US military is fighting a "war on terror" amounts to rhetoric, not fact.

Only as journalists stop cowering and start reporting on the basic flaws of the "war on

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"terror" concept will the body politic benefit from the free circulation of ideas and information – the lifeblood of democracy. And only then will there be appreciable media space to really explore why so many people have become violently angry with America.

The paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death, was published this summer. For information, go to: WarMadeEasy.com.